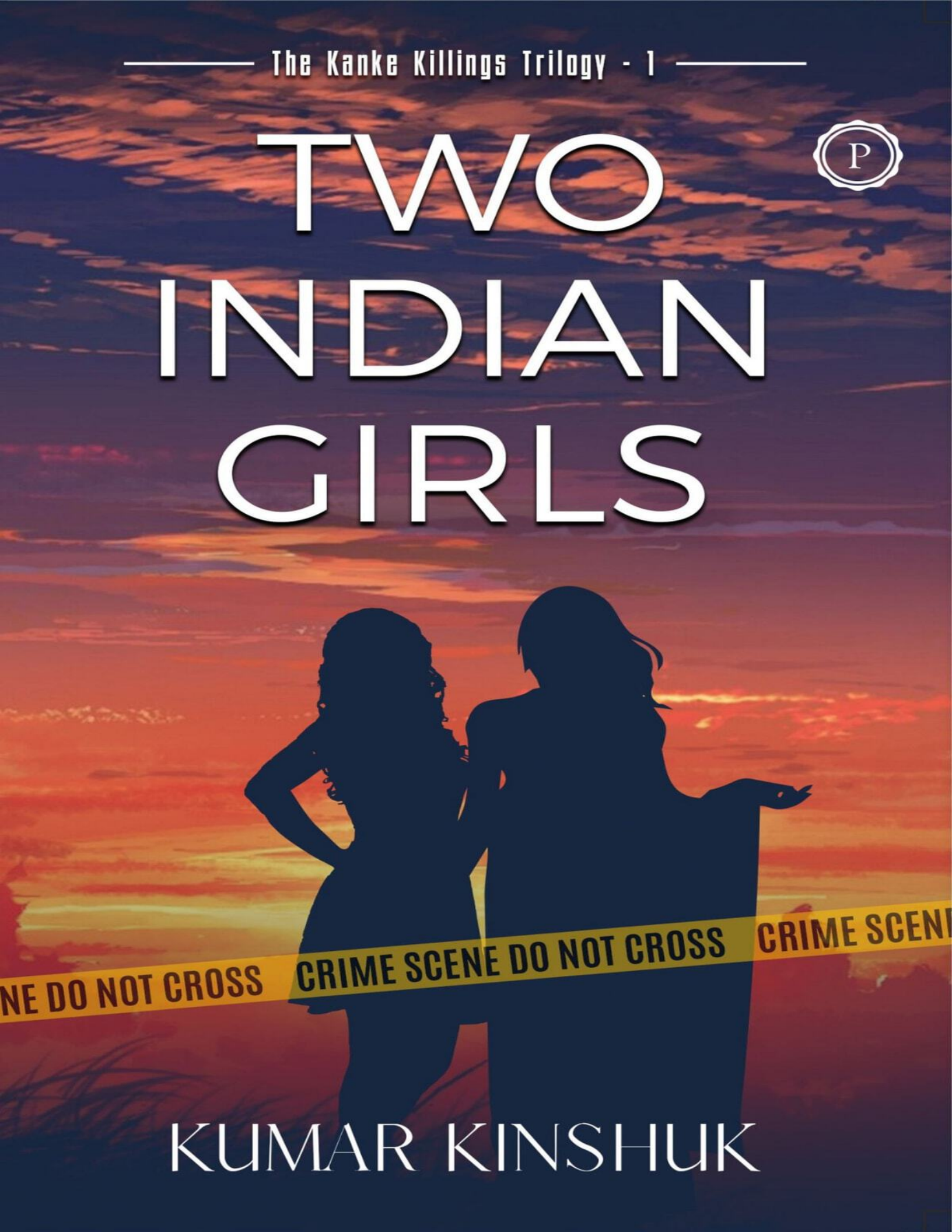
The Kanke Killings Trilogy - 1

TWO INDIAN GIRLS



KUMAR KINSHUK

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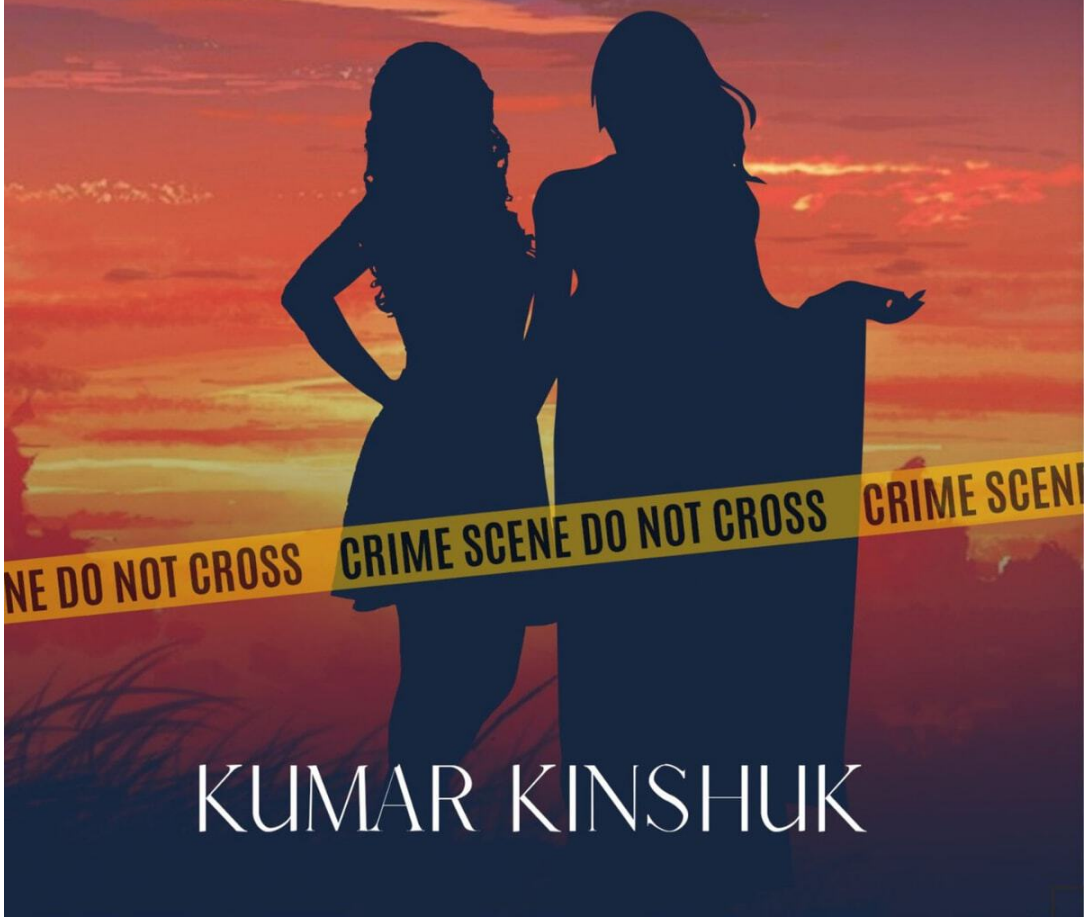

KUMAR KINSHUK

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THE KANKE KILLINGS TRILOGY

1

TWO
INDIAN GIRLS

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction. Space and time have been rearranged to suit the convenience of the book, and except for public figures, any resemblance to persons living or dead or actual events is purely coincidental. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with that of the author.

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TO

My Loving Dad

Dr. Rajpati Kumar Sinha

(Retired Prof. of English, Ranchi University, Ranchi)

He instilled in me a love for prose and for newspapers

FOR

What we become depends on what our fathers teach us.

– *Umberto Eco*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my wife Sony as she had to put up with me whilst I burnt the midnight oil. She did so with patience and possibly half-contempt. I utterly and so truly hoped that she would not punch me one day. She has seen better days. I love her more than I can express. It is an irony that I never let her know how blessed I feel to have her in my life. Well, this is my way of letting her know her meaning in my life. She would take it with a pinch of salt, though! I can live with that.

My kids Aryan and Aryahi have always been supportive of my efforts. They helped me a lot during the finalization of my marketing plan for this book. Their encouragement knew no bounds. My presence in social media merits attention because of their inputs.

My siblings Toshi and Gaurav have encouraged me and helped me whenever required. They have read my manuscript and debated with me the need for certain changes. They have truly helped me in my journey of writing this book.

To let you know, Sony was always my sounding board and despite our disagreements over the course the narrative should chart, she guided me to become a better writer.
My parents have always been the pillars of my strength. *Papa,* with his knowledge of literature, helped me sort out the narrative for myself and have clarity with the structure of the book. His was a very valuable contribution. My *mummy* Rekha covers my back and has faith and complete trust in my abilities. She gives me the strength of my character and inculcates in me a steely resolve to shine under the sun. Parents, as they say, are caregivers and I shall always remain indebted to them.

My in-laws have always encouraged me in my passion, and they dare me to dream big. Thank you for being there for me and to have given me such a

considerate and beautiful wife! Continue to bless us mom and dad…

I would like to thank the editor of my novel. He has been thorough in his work and wishes to remain behind the curtain. He helped me sort out the book and helped me dispassionately keep it short. He also suggested me to keep a different title than what I had imagined and was sold to. Upon his suggestion, I changed the title.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank the team at Poetic Imagica. They have been helpful and supportive throughout the process.

Thank you all! I feel blessed!

CHARACTERS

1. Ajit Kumar — the young husband
2. Khushbu Srivastava Kumar — the young wife
3. Amitabh Kumar — Ajit's father
4. Reeta Kumar — Ajit's mother
5. *Raja* Srivastava — Khushbu's father
6. Alka Srivastava — Khushbu's mother
7. Rajiv Kumar — Police Inspector
8. Raghu Jain — Sub-Inspector
9. Bishan Sinha — Police *Havildar*
10. Ravi Kumar (IAS) — Ajit's *Bade Chachu*
11. Sheila Kumar — Ajit's *Badi Chachi*
12. Sashi Jha — Ajit's elderly neighbor
13. Amrita — Khushbu's best friend
14. Vivek — Ajit's friend
15. Varun — Ajit's friend
16. Amitesh — Ajit's friend
17. Ranu Baiga — Sorcerer
18. Kalki Gond Baiga —Ranu Baiga's wife
19. Akki Gond — Kalki's younger sister
20. Ramesh Sharma (Guruji) — Principal of school at Jabalpur
21. G. Tewari (IAS) — *Bade Bhaiya's* boss
22. Mrs. Sen — Class-teacher, Std. IV, School, Jabalpur
23. Surana — Amrita's junior
24. Amit Khandelwal (Cockpit) — Amrita's senior

PROLOGUE

21 December 2014

Khushbu told herself, “I am not a psychological wreck! I do not think so. Not yet. My silence is but a cacophony of shrieks. A symphony gone awry. My life has a discordant note. The sacred vow of ‘Till death do us part’ may be rapidly coming true. Could not truly meet Ajit yet. Could not touch his soul. Could not touch his life yet. I will part, I guess.

The ghosts of the troubled past have arisen from their graves. To bury her. To kill her. And I cannot let that happen. The ghosts need to be buried. For long. For eternity. I do not have much of a choice, do I? Need to go down there, in the depths of the graveyards and pull them to their depths below. What should I do? I have no one to go to. Not even my best friend Amrita. No counsel. No mentor. No teacher. Not even my mother. Cannot speak to a soul on this earth. What have I come to? Why me?

Should I have made a life with Ajit and then tried to make a career? Guess it was asking for too much. It did not have to unravel so early for me. I feel bad as I wanted to be with Amrita, my best friend, till we grew old together. We complemented each other and were a true example of Two Indian Girls.”

Khushbu was pensive, thoughtful, and morose. Silent and composed. Thinking through. Taking her time. Mulling her options.

Would she walk the earth anymore?

TILL DEATH DO US PART

22 December 2014

Khushbu is dead. Khushbu Srivastava Kumar is no more. She was found hanging from the fan in her bedroom. Police Inspector Rajiv Ranjan arrived with Sub-Inspector Raghu Jain and his Havildar (sergeant) Bishan Singh. They gathered all possible evidence that might be present at the scene of crime. Khushbu's bedroom was marked out in yellow tapes. No one could go anywhere near. The body was in the same room. The police were informed by Khushbu's father- in-law, Amitabh Kumar, at 7.45 in the morning. Rajiv Ranjan and his team took photographs from various angles before laying the body down.

There were no marks on her body. At least externally it looked like a clear case of suicide by hanging by the neck till death. Post-mortem would probably throw some light on the cause of death. There was a stool toppled over, beneath her body. The room was not even bolted from inside. It was just closed. A benefit of doubt could not, therefore, be given to Khushbu's in- laws as they were at the house at the estimated time of the incident.

According to the initial statement of Amitabh Kumar and his wife Rita Kumar, Khushbu was their prized possession. They were thrilled when she came into the life of their only son, Ajit. Typically, Khushbu would generally get up early, at around 6 a.m. She would prepare tea for the family and have a cup herself at around 6.30 a.m. Thereafter, she would do her morning chores and come out of her room only after her puja (morning prayers) at around 8 o'clock.

On that devastating day, she had had her tea with her in-laws at around 6.30 a.m. She started her morning chores at 7. Rita claimed that she went to see her daughter-in-law at around 7.35 a.m. to inform her that she was going out for a stroll with Amitabh. Weather was particularly good that morning. That was when she saw her beloved daughter-in-law hanging from the fan.

She collapsed on the floor with a loud cry. Amitabh rushed to the room and was numbed for a moment. He pulled Rita up and they cried unconsolably for a good five minutes before calling up Ajit and the police.

Ajit was devastated. He was howling. His had been a sad marriage. His world had gone topsy-turvy. Ajit had arrived at around 11.30 a.m. from Muzaffarpur. He had gone there the previous night for a business meeting. Inspector Rajiv wished to speak to Ajit and his family members and take their statements.

It didn't look like a normal suicide. It looked like a crime. Rajiv Ranjan surmised it could be a crime under Section 304 B of the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 of the Indian Penal Code. The unfortunate incident had happened within a month of their marriage. They tied the nuptial knot on the 27th of November that year.

The relatives of Ajit Kumar arrived in white kurta- pyjamas and white salwar suits or saris. There was a lot of commotion in the house at Rajendra Nagar, Patna.

The neighbors also came over. People had morose expressions. An elderly lady came in, looking dazed but agitated. She was not happy at the turn of events. She was the most vocal and made herself heard. She was Mrs. Jha from the neighboring house. Inspector Rajiv spoke to her for a minute and took her coordinates.

Khushbu's parents were on their way from their Kanke Road apartment at Ranchi. They had lost their world. They had experienced sheer excitement and joy just a month ago, but now their world had come to a standstill. They could not believe that such cruelty could happen to them. It was the 21st century, for God's sake! Khushbu was their only offspring. They had gone overboard to give a multitude of gifts, ornaments, and a grand reception. They had also gifted a brand-new Honda Mobilio to their son-in-law.

MARRIAGE FINALIZATION

10 July 2014

There had been no such demands from Ajit's family. They had just wanted a nice wedding so that the baraatis (invitees of the groom who make up the wedding procession) were happy and content. Their only demand was a sumptuous non-vegetarian food for both the days and comfortable stay arrangements. Pramod had arranged two Volvo buses for the two days to get the baraat from Patna to Ranchi.

She had met Ajit earlier. Their parents had decided to marry them off sometime in November. The engagement was fixed for the 16th of July. It was just a week away.

Ajit Kumar was from Patna, the capital of Bihar. The city was undergoing a mammoth change in the infrastructure and the wellbeing of its people. The recent rule under Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister was remarkable. People of the city had started to nurture dreams. Capitalism was back with a vengeance. Cars were flying off showrooms. Luxury cars could be seen on the streets. The city was undergoing a makeover.

Nitish Kumar's JDU (Janata Dal United) was supported by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). It was a coalition government till the previous general elections. The coalition was for good governance and for the rule of law in Bihar. However, post a drubbing at the hands of BJP in the general elections for the Lok Sabha in Bihar, Nitish Kumar resigned from the CM's post and Jiten Ram Manjhi was elected as the CM. This time around, Nitish's JDU was supported by the RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal) of Lalu Prasad Yadav, the erstwhile CM of Bihar, and the INC (Indian National Congress). It was a difficult period in the political landscape of Bihar. Nitish Kumar had emerged as a force to reckon with in the local polity. However, he had never been a political heavyweight with a mass following. But he was a well-read and accomplished politician who could be the savior that Bihar had long needed. His tryst with BJP had had its share of

problems and hence the changes. On the other hand, Jiten Ram Majhi had his own political ambitions and he had received his limelight and space in the local polity. It was all he cared for.

Slowly, however, it was getting increasingly clear to the local politically aware Bihari that something was missing. They needed an administrator with a clean image. Nitish, along with the BJP, had provided the state with a clean administration and decent growth. A lot of opportunities had been created for the masses and people had seen a few years of capable administration after the very chaotic so-called Jungle Raj of RJD.

The RJD leader, Lalu Prasad Yadav, was a leader of the downtrodden. He had represented the fight of the Yadavas and Muslims in the polity of Bihar for over a decade. He was their messiah. He had taken the fight of the OBCs (Other Backward Castes) to the upper castes. It was a fight to gain an upper hand in the political economy of Bihar. For, the OBCs, apart from Dalits, had been the downtrodden for far too many centuries and were under the rule and oppression of the upper castes.

THE ENGAGEMENT DAY

16 July 2014

The engagement was to be held at 6.30 p.m. at Capitol Hill, Ranchi. Capitol Hill is an upmarket hotel with grand banquet facilities. The food and beverage options are immense. During the wedding season, the hotel is in great demand. Five rooms had been booked for the family and friends of Ajit Kumar. A suite had been booked for the Samdhi Sahib (Ajit's father) and the Samdhan Sahiba (Ajit's mother).

Khushbu was terribly busy that day. It was one of the most important days of her life. She couldn't have much interaction with Ajit. It was a typical arranged marriage. A worry had grown in her that she did not know much about Ajit's preferences and attitude. However, she believed they could start chatting once the engagement rings had been exchanged. She would get to know more about him over the next few months of courtship.

It is said that Indian marriages are made in heaven. It cannot be untrue. Millions of Indians believe in the maxim and they do have unbroken partnerships, through generations, as the belief goes long back. Khushbu also accepted Ajit as her fait accompli. She was nervous, though. It was a rare feeling. She felt weak in the knees. Her stomach churned a little every now and then. Had it not been for over a hundred guests and family members, she would have been worried. It was all in the game!

Amrita was Khushbu's best friend. She was with Khushbu throughout the day. At 1.30 p.m., Khushbu had a light lunch mostly of fruits and salads. She did not want to have a heavy lunch. She had to sit at the parlor for dressing up. Khushbu's family members had arrived in the morning from various cities. Their house in Kanke Road, was in shambles. People had a hearty lunch and there was a cheerful buzz all around. Khushbu's family was non- vegetarian. As such, the menu for lunch had simple mutton curry with steamed rice, salads, *palak-paneer ki sabzi* and *kaali dal*. A couple of breads were also part of the menu.

Khushbu left for main road with Amrita in tow. She carried with her the engagement gown for the evening along with her understated jewellery. She was in awe of muted and non-sparkling gold jewellery of 18 carats. Her jewellery was studded with semi-precious stones of multiple colors.

Bihari families are used to 22-carat gold jewellery. Womenfolk revel in sparking yellow gold. It adds punch to their toned looks. Khushbu was what people call *gori*. Bihari women consider gold jewellery a good omen, while Bihari men consider 22-carat jewellery to be an insurance, for its value never fades. In fact, it keeps rising quite contrary to general market forces and acts like a foil for inflation. Gold has traditionally provided inflation adjusted returns. Khushbu, however, did not like 22-carat jewellery. She had a different if not a refined taste. She was happy with her kind of jewellery.

Amrita was spellbound to see her necklace and earrings. It was not heavy, but it had an otherworldly charm. She also liked Khushbu's deep blue dress that had a lot of work at the seams. It was apparently hand- woven. It had sharp cuts but well within the limits of the Bihari decency. The dress was obviously not liked by Khushbu's folk, and they were quite blatant about it. Her *maasi* (mother's sister) was the most vocal and rejected it as a nondescript dress, not fit for the occasion. A few other elders in the family also expressed their dislike. They were firm believers of the traditional 5-yard sari.

But the undercurrent in the house did not affect Khushbu. She was a talented and confident person, though not reactionary. She understood the narrow thought processes of the older generation. She did not despise it.

Khushbu and Amrita reached the She-Magix Beauty Parlor. It was a new parlor with courteous staff. It was a ladies' parlor, which was unique in this age of unisex parlors. Khushbu was happy the moment she entered the parlor. It was done up well and she reveled in the aromatic bliss. The modern creams are heavenly; they work like a charm on the olfactory nerves.

Khushbu was taken to one of the internal chambers. She had had undergone a complete beauty regimen which included de-tan facial, pedicure, manicure, body polish and some adjustments of her hair a couple of days back. She was back to the parlor today only for a thorough make-up. Amrita

was to sit through the episode, carefully looking after her friend and keeping her amused. At 2 p.m., a make-up artist started with the cleansing routine. Khushbu was in bliss, soaking in the primary delights of an arranged marriage. It was her day and she wished to make the most of it. She was a frugal spender by nature, but this day was different. Things could wait. Even her own attitude could be in suspended animation for a while. She would soon get back to her way of doing things—her very own way of not spending unless it was required, and even then, not spending too much! This parlor expedition would set her back by ten grands. But she would remember this for a long time to come. One does not forget such days of ones' life.

Amrita was spinning a tale of long-lost friends who suddenly meet up and get engaged. She was rather different from Khushbu, a striking contrast really. Her opinions and attitudes were different. She was a free bird and wanted to remain so till eternity. She loathed the system of marriage itself, let alone arranged marriage. She, however, got along well with Khushbu. They were sounding boards for each other. Despite being so varied in tastes, they were perfect foils for each other. They would discuss the institution of marriage often, though, for Amrita, it was not an institution. It was a sure-fire recipe for disaster. How on earth could someone marry another person without an inkling of his likes and dislikes? But she also wondered how these marriages sustained so often. Probably it is because we have a patriarchal society. Women adjust eventually to their men's ways, more than men adjust to their women's wishes.

But also, the social customs were gradually changing. Women were gaining a bigger say in the household. Earlier, they were relegated to the role of caregivers while men were the breadwinners. But now, a whole lot of girls in their twenties were getting into the new-age workforce. They would be the earning, independent mothers of the future. A part of Khushbu, however, wished to be a committed homemaker for her family. She was not sorted on the matter and wished to take it slowly, by trying to understand her in-law's and her fiancé's viewpoint.

BIHAR: THE QUARTET OF THE PROFESSORS

14 July 2014

Dr. P. K. Sinha (Binod Babu), his younger brother Dr. R. K. Sinha (Pramod Babu), Prof. M. Sharma and Dr S. Srivastava met once again on a sultry morning at the residence of Professor Sharma at Ashok Nagar, Ranchi. All of them were retired professors and avid readers. They were also politically aware. They were active during the Emergency as youngsters with voices of their own. However, due to family considerations, they remained critics of the Emergency, but never took active part in the J. P. Movement.

"Sharma ji," said Binod *Babu*, "Thank you for being here with us every day. I, for one, look forward to these discussions."

Prof Sharma said, "I am sure all of us look forward to this little meeting of ours. Cannot think of a life without this."

He turned to Pramod *Babu* and said, "Pramod, have I told you that I loved the book you published? *The Paradise Lost* is such a well-researched book. Your writing is effortless and has a lot of depth. I do not understand much of English literature, but after reading the books recommended by you, I am slowly gaining some understanding of it."

Pramod *Babu* was happy to hear it, and he said, "I am aware that you loved my book. You told me so earlier. But I think the title of my book was not appropriate. People might have thought it was a treatise on the original *Paradise Lost* by Milton. Mine, however, was a treatise on the Indo-African writers in English. I could have given a more appropriate title like *The Paradise That Was*!"

Prof Sharma said, "It should have done really well. It is an original work by an Indian English writer."

Dr Srivastava intervened, "*Arrey Sharma ji, aaj hum kya aapas ki hi baatein karenge ya thodi bahut desh-duniya ki charcha bhi ho jaye?* (Sharma ji, would we be only talking about each other today, or should we also discuss matters pertaining to the nation and the world?)"

Binod *Babu*, Pramod *Babu* and Prof Sharma looked at each other nonplussed and then got back to their normal business.

Prof Sharma began, "I believe India is on the cusp of a tectonic shift. Feudal mindsets and mentalities are being challenged and sociologists believe that they are fast changing. The media is acting as a catalyst for real change in the mindsets of people. Narendra Modi is the harbinger of change. He was elected on the promise to reform governance. He claimed, 'minimum government, maximum governance.' Indians were enthused. They were happy to believe in his *56" ka seena* (56"-chest). He created a make-believe world and Indians bought into the metaphor."

Pramod *Babu* chimed in, "Bihar gave a thumbs up to BJP in the general elections, as did UP. The Government was talking about *'Beti bachao, beti padhao' (save girls, teach girls)*. India was talking about an anti-corruption crusade at the government level. Nitish ji was called *Sushasan* (good governance) *Babu*. His government in Bihar has given corruption and crime-free governance for almost two full terms along with BJP as partner. The drubbing for JD-U in the general elections, however, did not go down well with Nitish. Even though he stepped down and gave his chair to Jiten Ram Manjhi, a Dalit, he was very much in control of the party, if not the government! Though Manjhi was a Brutus to Nitish, Nitish had a better grip on the party. A lot of bad blood ensued. All parties tried to fish in the troubled waters."

Dr Srivastava added, "Bihar is in the throes of a change, politically at least. But will Bihar really change? Will the feudal tendencies shift? Will modern thoughts be lapped up by the populace? *Sushasan Babu* had aligned with the forces of the *Gunda (goon)* Raj (rule). Lalu Yadav, the erstwhile Chief Minister of Bihar is now with Nitish. He is a verbose, intelligent, and outspoken person. It was to be a fight to the finish. Does BJP have the home-grown mettle to dislodge the combined might of two erstwhile CMs? Will they go with Narendra

Modi's face alone and not allow the electorate the choice for a local CM candidate?"

Binod *Babu* said, "*Sushasan Babu* may well be on course for a victory in the new scheme of things with his coalition with RJD. However, it may prove to be a futile exercise for the Biharis as the state may well go back to Jungle Raj."

In the 21st century, the discussions in Bihar were still around caste equations and class factors. But the upcoming election could well be the genesis of change that Indians had been yearning for.

Pramod *Babu* reminded everyone while leaving, 'don't forget to join the engagement ceremony of Khushbu. I understand it is in Capitol Hill. It would be good fun!'

Others were positive and they said their good-byes.

THE SURREAL EVENING

16 July 2014

Khushbu arrived at 5 p.m. She bedazzled everyone with her gown. She was all decked up, not like a traditional Bihari bahu but like a modern Bihari girl. She looked confident, calm, and composed. She exuded an aura. For a moment, her relatives and friends looked at her as if they were 'etherized upon a table,' waiting to be brought out of their coma.

'Let us go, then, you and I

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table.'

- T. S. Elliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,

Published, June 1915

The menfolk were the first to recover. They complemented her on her looks. Women did not do that easily. They might have liked her outfit and the silent charm that she exuded, but to compliment or not was the question. Maasi was the first to tell her that although she looked good, she would have looked better had she worn the traditional ghaghra or sari.

Khushbu did not care. She cared for her mumma's verdict. But her mother was completely dazed, half expecting the looks of her grown-up daughter. Tears welled up in her eyes. Her dad also had tears in his eyes. They were happy tears. They could not believe their daughter was now a grown-up lady. She looked

resplendent. She mesmerized everyone with her effusive charm. It was the ring exchange today; she would get married in a few months and would leave her parents' home. She would be a new member of her husbands' family. What would her parents do without their princess? How would they lead their lives?

The political discourse ended with the girl's arrival. Everyone got up to put in the final touches on themselves and get totally ready. The ladies were hysterical now. A dab of foundation here, the perfect pout with 12-hour lipstick there. Selfies were flying thick and fast with perfect pouts, Khushbu being the most sought-after selfie favorite. The women mildly cribbed that it would have been wonderful if there had been a team of makeup specialists who could have glammed them up in the comfort of their homes.

It was time to move out in groups to the Capitol Hill. The girl's family had to reach there earlier as they were the hosts. They needed to oversee the arrangements. Some of the menfolk moved out and were the first to reach the venue. Slowly, all the hosts arrived in multiple trips of the four hired cars. Khushbu was the last to arrive, at around 7 p.m. She was immediately taken to the anteroom near the banquet hall. Amrita helped her with her last-minute adjustments. She brought her a bottle of Coke. The two girls took in the evening as it unfolded. Khushbu was now almost chewing her nails. Despite the air-conditioner running full steam, she felt restless. Soon, her little cousin ran in to announce that Ajit and his relatives had arrived.

Ajit was taken to the Maharaja chair on the decked-up stage and seated there. Next to him, a similar chair lay empty. The chair had the old-world charm of kings and noblemen. It had intricate carvings in wood, which were filled with some metal akin to silver. This was the typical Indian bridal chair. Browse through any number of photographs of Indian weddings, you will see similar chairs. India is a land of diversity, but some things stay the same. This is a typical chair being one of the old Pramod favorites.

Suddenly, there was some commotion in the room. Ajit looked askance. He could see his fiancée walking in, slowly, with pride. She was not ethereal. She was not beautiful. She was not pretty. She was not alluring. She was not prepossessing. But she looked downright sexy. She was hot and desirable. She was seductive. She was sensual. She was tempting and lustful. She was appealing. She was adorable!

Ajit was a smart young man. He was 5'8", average by Indian standards. With a bony physique and fair complexion, he looked quite young. He was charming and gregarious. He was always surrounded by his friends and cousins.

Khushbu sat on the other *Maharaja* (Emperor) chair next to Ajit. The couple looked sort of cute in a made-for-each- other way. Several compliments were showered upon them by their relatives and friends. There was an air of happiness all around. It was a gift of the Gods. They had opened the heavens to shower flowers on the newly engaged couple. Or so it seemed. Rings were exchanged. The room was filled with people jumping over one another to catch a glimpse. The gift presentation ceremony ensued. The older couples got into a queue to bless Khushbu and Ajit. They would hand over their gifts and then go for dinner and drinks. The youngsters were already having a ball. They were having snacks with soft drinks. They had gotten into groups to get to know one another better. This was their first opportunity to meet so many others from the opposite party. It was an evening full of fun and dance. Ajit got into a jig with his friends. Khushbu felt shy. She did not dance with Ajit. She shook a leg with her friends and then went back to her chair. But she was happy; everything looked so unreal. Ajit looked smart and cheerful. He was obviously happy to have Khushbu as his life partner. Khushbu was mesmerized. She felt content. Her weakness had given way to cheerfulness. She spoke softly with her friends.

Amrita was both surprised and happy at Khushbu's choice of Ajit. She knew in her heart of hearts that this was another successful arranged marriage. She was starting to think about it too. She wished she could confront herself. She would explore the

institution of arranged marriage more openly now, without her preconceived notions. But there was a lot of time to debate it with Khushbu; today was not the day. Not the evening for sure. Amrita cozied up to Khushbu. It was such a fairy-tale engagement. Amrita was keen to give due credit to Khushbu's parents for their find — Ajit. Somehow, such a striking contrast was unfathomable. Was her stance of no commitments for life better in relationships? Did she enjoy more and get less pain? Is it not true that possessiveness brings pain? Are lives not wrecked when one surrenders oneself to the other being? She was in search of the truth of relationships.

She had had her share of serious relationships. But she was contemplative; she did not get involved psychologically. For her, it was for her carnal desires. She was satisfied sexually. She did not need to get married for that. Hers was a different lifestyle. She loved herself. She was a narcissist. She had plain desires. She was a go-to girl in her team of IT whiz kids. She lived it up. She could party till the wee hours of the morning. She had a lot of friends with benefits. Guy friends. She was bubbly, cheerful, and spirited. She was awesome at her job. Her desires were satiated. She was satisfied. She was living a good life.

She was the new *Insta* girl of India. She was active on social media with all its hashtags and its charms. She had a significant fan following, and all her moves on the screen were lapped up by the masses. Her social accounts were not private. She wanted to create a mass base of followers and use it to gain possible traction in future, if any such opportunity beckoned. Her enigmatic personality and her class defying act had made her quite successful. She would use her social media accounts to get out of her own boredom of sorts. Her corporate moves were not covered on social media as she kept it at a distance. Her life, however, was an open book on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

Amrita was petrified to see her best friend Khushbu steal away from some of the better things in life. Khushbu would make a good *Bhartiya naari* (Indian girl), but Amrita was not to be. She did not wish to marry. She was happy alone. She would enjoy and revel in groups but be home alone. It was an antithesis for her. Her

presence would be online while she was home alone. She was not a selfie girl even though she loved social media. She was more of a high-on-energy girl with brains. She would typically post book reviews, movie reviews and product reviews online. She was a voracious reader of non-fiction books mostly from the management and self-help category.

Amrita was a modern woman. She was aware, awake. Aware of her rights, of her surroundings, of her friends and colleagues. She was aware of her boss's designs on her. She was a woman of the 21st century. She could have been a lawyer. She was fundamentally sound. She was not hypocritical. She was well-read. She was balanced in her views on economy and the polity. She had clear views on the society and on women's rights. However, she was not a flagbearer of female empowerment. She was not an activist. She led a nonchalant life. She was a carefree bird. She despised duplicity. She liked direct communication. She could ask for favors. She could use her feminine charm. She wished for all the luxuries in life. She wanted to break the glass ceiling in the corporate hierarchy. She wanted to have a quick career growth. She did not want to climb up the ladder. She wished to be put on top by a turn of fate—a fate that she wrote for herself, a fate that would not be cowed down, a fate that might trample others to reach the top. She wanted to revel in the loneliness at the top. At her age. At 27.

Ajit wanted to dine in the company of Khushbu and her friends. His friends and cousins could not take their eyes off Khushbu and Amrita. Amrita was not half as sexy or as desirable as Khushbu. She, however, exuded unhindered charm. She was graceful. She carried herself with poise. She was elegance personified. She had a welcoming nature. She was uninhibited and honest. She was upfront and inviting. She could feel one's inner desires with a fleeting glance of her deep eyes.

Ajit walked over to Khushbu. He wanted to strike a conversation. Khushbu looked at him and felt giddy. Her stomach was churning again and how! She felt weak and sat down with a thud. Amrita ran up to her with a glass of fresh juice. Khushbu felt better after

gulping down the juice. Ajit and his friends surrounded her. They called for dinner to be served. A table was laid out and they were seated. Khushbu and Ajit were the centre of attraction. Ajit's friend, Vivek, sat next to Amrita. Varun, Ajit's cousin, and Amitesh, Ajit's friend, were also at the table. They were served the choicest delicacies. Lucknowi kebabs of delicate mutton roasted directly on the fire and cooked slowly in an urn; were served to everyone's delight. They were juicy. Chicken kebabs of multiple varieties were served along with prawns and other such culinary delights. They were also served liquor. Ajit refused. So did Khushbu. They went for soft mocktails and fresh juices. Their friends went with booze.

Liquor was not yet openly served at Bihari weddings. In that way, a Bihari wedding was different from a Punjabi wedding. Booze was an anathema. It was arranged exclusively for the *baraatis* and not for the *sharaatis* (the bride's invitees).

Vivek was a handsome young man. He spoke well and was engaging in his discussions. Although they were all talking in the group, his eyes would stray towards Amrita often. Amrita picked up the cues. Khushbu could also understand. Girls have a sixth sense, for whatever that really means. Khushbu forbade Amrita. Not with her guests! But Amrita had other designs. Not for the fun of it, though. She wanted to charm Vivek into complete submission. This was for Khushbu. Vivek would be the information superhighway for them. Amrita knew a thing or two about men. She was worried about the safety and security of Khushbu in the new family. She wanted to be able to command the proceedings. She, for one, could have charmed Ajit himself into submission, but that would not have been to Khushbu's liking. Amrita knew her friend better than her friend did herself. Khushbu still believed in the maxim that there was someone for her. God had created someone for her. But she needed to deserve him. She had to be loyal to him. She had to submit herself to his wishes.

The dinner was awesome. The invitees took their leave, albeit slowly. It was just around 10 p.m. The night was still young.

Vivek slipped out. Amrita gave him her contact details. He was in a hurry. He needed to find himself a room in the vicinity, but not in the same hotel! That would be risky. He drove out with his driver. The summer breeze was strong. It was only mildly cold. The air was romantic. He was thrilled. It was the perfect moonlit night. Not a full moon, but there was 'magic in the moonlight.' But not literally as in the movie by the same name released that year.

He found a room at the Ashoka Hotel. It was the perfect setting. It had open lawns and balconies. It was well-kept. He messaged the details to Amrita.

Khushbu left for her residence along with others, having bid goodbye to Ajit and his family members. Her soon to be mother-in-law hugged her. She was overjoyed to see Khushbu. She was the perfect bride for her son. So, she felt. Khushbu's parents were also very happy with Ajit and his family members. The evening went off well. Khushbu had received a lot of gifts and jewellery from her in-law's family. She was content. She thought she liked Ajit in her brief interaction. He was modern in his outlook. He wanted Khushbu to be a breadwinner for the family. Today, with such high inflation and such low annual increments, it was difficult to survive on single incomes. He needed a double engine to pull the family of four. His father had retired on a limited monthly pension, which was insufficient to run the household. But Indians had become materialistic of late. Even youngsters would flash expensive hand phones and stayed connected with the world on a minute by minute basis, via social media.

Khushbu wanted to talk to Amrita, but Amrita told her she had a splitting headache. She told her she was happy at her choice of groom. Khushbu bade her a pleasant night and went to her room. Amrita took her purse and left.

Vivek was waiting for Amrita at the entrance foyer of the Hotel. She met him with a smile. Everything was sorted. A few currency notes passed hands. She gave her PAN card as a proof to be used at the check-in counter. Voila! They had the room to themselves.

They went up to their room. It was neatly done up. Amrita immediately went to the washroom. Vivek waited for her in anticipation. He was amazed at his luck that day. That too in a part of the erstwhile Bihar! In Ranchi, the present-day capital of Jharkhand, he was in a hotel room for a one-night stand. India was changing by the day. By leaps and bounds. Girls were taking the lead. They were confident and aware. They got whatever they wanted. Was India changing upside down?

Amrita was now dressed in an evening gown. It had sharp cuts. Looking at her fair complexion, Vivek could not hide his glee and his lust for her. It was not his night though. He had to comply with her orders. She felt hungry. Vivek ordered some pastries and a bottle of wine. He also ordered some cheddar cheese. Amrita hogged on the pastries. She loved the liquid chocolate dark pastry. It added to her sins. She had a good physique, for she worked out normally. She would also walk five odd kilometers a day early in the mornings. The night was beginning to unfold and lustfully so.

Amrita left the hotel at 7.30 a.m. after a brief walk in the lush green lawns. Vivek was intelligent. He knew he had been used. He was happy to be used again, if required. This was in return for a favor or two. Amrita would keep asking him for some information on Ajit's family and his general whereabouts.

But Amrita was not very happy. She was somehow not feeling well. Something had changed. Something was not right. It was not Vivek; it was something else. She was not able to pinpoint the reason. This was getting difficult. Vivek had narrated the life history of Ajit's family and his own involvement with the family. It was not much. He would normally meet Ajit on the football ground. He knew a bit about Ajit's family. They were from a humble background. Ajit's parents had to cut on their meals and their lifestyle to be able to raise Ajit. He was sent for higher studies. They were the ideal kind of Bihari parents. Their only love was their child and all they could think of was Ajit and his wellbeing. They never spent a penny on themselves. Their own life as such was non-existent; it always revolved around Ajit. It was now Ajit's chance to fulfil his parents' requirement and

wishes. His father wanted to send them on a foreign tour, maybe to South East Asia. It would still cost him a bomb. He had to save and save enough for it. Now that he was getting married, there would be demands from his wife as well. He knew young girls were really demanding. They would be on social media and try and ape the lifestyle of the rich and the famous internationally. He had to work hard and push himself more.

Amrita met Khushbu at the breakfast table. She told her that she felt better. Her headache had subsided. Something just did not add up, however. She did not understand why Ajit's parents had not asked for any dowry. It was a common demand in Bihar. In Bihar of yore, the famous dowry demand was a cycle and a watch. In modern times, one would expect modernity in thoughts and in actions. That was somehow not to be. Dowry was alive and kicking even in 21st century Bihar. An IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer was sold for a crore in the dowry market. A Bank P.O. (Probationary Officer) would go for upwards of thirty lakhs. A State Government peon also fetched a few lakhs and a Maruti Alto, for Maruti 800 was now an extinct beast. Biharis had an undying preference for a government servant. *Babu*s were in high demand in the marriage market, as they were in a safe profession. Their jobs were safe and pensionable. They fetched a high price in the marriage market. There were colonies in Patna where upon throwing a stone, one would surely hit a Bank P.O. Else, it would hit a state government employee. Bihar was producing a crazy number of UPSC candidates. It did not matter whether they landed up with Grade-A or Grade-B services. All that mattered was that they were in central service. There was a clear definition with open rates in the dowry market.

Amrita was worried. Even though Ajit was not a government employee, he could still have demanded and gotten a dowry. He may have fetched upwards of ten odd lakhs. He was good-looking and he worked for a large multinational company. He was in the Fast- Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) business as an Area Executive. This was his first job which also entailed 22 odd days of travelling a month. Something was not adding up for Amrita!

She decided to raise this topic with Khushbu's father, Raja Srivastava. As luck would have it, she saw Raja instructing the cooks. They needed to get the breakfast tables cleared and cleaned to make way for an early lunch. Many relatives were scheduled to leave that afternoon. Amrita caught on with Raja. Raja was happy to see her. She sat down next to him and asked him about the dowry that he was paying.

Raja was nonplussed. Amrita came to know that he was not paying any dowry. Not that it was demanded. Not that he had the wherewithal to pay. He was still thinking of gifting his daughter a brand-new car. Bigger than an Alto. All that he had to cough up was to be spent on the meals of the *baraatis*. The marriage reception had to be good. He could only fork out as much. He asked Amrita not to worry. He could understand where she came from. However, he was happy that he could find such a family for Khushbu. Ajit was a self-made man who believed in himself. He wanted to create a loving world for his family on his own. If ever Khushbu wanted, she could also add to the family income. He was game for it, which was quite in contrast to the Bihari traditions and customs. 'Times are a-changing,' like Bob Dylan once wrote for his song.

Raja was a proud father. As was Alka, a proud mother. They had spent heavily on their daughter's education. They had given a good citizen to the country. That was all they could do. That was all they could ask of God. That's what a middleclass family aspires for.

A COG IN THE WHEEL

Ranchi: 11 a.m.

26 August 2014

The four University professors sat down together at Pramod Babu's residence. They indulged in light banter over tea and snacks that Rekha ji (Dr R K Sinha's wife) happily served. She also sat down for a brief while to talk just for a while.

"I thought the engagement ceremony was well attended and very well organized. Alka and Raja *babu* must be very happy. They have found a very good family for their *samdhiana* (in-laws). Ajit looked good and Khushbu looked resplendent. They make a beautiful pair!: Rekha ji said.

"Absolutely! They are wonderful kids and may God bless them. I loved the kebabs and the biryani there." Prof. Sharma chuckled.

Binod *Babu*, who was a retired professor of Political Science from the Marwari College, Ranchi, started a different kind of discussion. He said, "Government is run by bureaucracy, not much by the politicians. Politicians come and go. Political parties come and go. Bureaucracy remains the same. They are the sheet anchors, a role they perform so well against the whims and fancies of megalomaniacs. They are not easily swayed by the ulterior motives and desires of their political masters. Bureaucracy guides the ministers and the Chief Minister. They do not allow files to be passed quickly. Files need to be dusted off frequently. They are in the habit of sitting parched atop the *Babu*'s table. There is also the friction and movement tax it commands from table to table."

This thought provided the required fuel to the brewing fire. Pramod *Babu*, a retired Professor of English from the Ranchi College, butted in saying, "The NIC and a host of other private companies created file

transfer systems to get files online. File Tracking System was implemented throughout the country, despite the best intentions of the bureaucracy to the contrary."

Prof Sharma, a professor of Psychology at the Marwari College, Ranchi, was not to be left behind. He jumped in, saying, "Pramod, bureaucracy was trying to cope up all these years. Activists and a new class of modern politicians have emerged, and they want more. Slowly and steadily a change in their mentality can be felt. The younger bureaucrats are social media conscious. They wish to create an image. A friendly and a workaholic image. The 11-to-5 bureaucracy may be changing fast."

Dr Srivastava, professor of Hindi at Ranchi University, interjected Prof Sharma saying, "Sharma ji, going by whatever, I understand from the media, and from my friends in bureaucracy and journalism, it seems that Modi ji is a hard taskmaster. Word is that he sleeps only for a couple of hours. He keeps fit as he is deeply into Yoga and meditation."

"Well, I think," Binod *Babu* said, "Nitish Kumar is also a hard taskmaster. He was earlier in the bureaucracy, and so he knows their ways of working. Files needed to be passed with remarks that are done in a particular manner. Otherwise, the Comptroller and Auditor General could question decisions and imply multiple motives. Nitish ji, however, knew how to get work done. He was a no-nonsense man. He redeemed the image of the bureaucrats somewhat. The image of the bureaucracy was already at its nadir. It could not go any further south. Some bureaucrats in the past have shown how low they can stoop. They can even be servile to the wishes of the strong and capable politicians, country be damned! They would be taken care of. Their postings would be secure in good positions. They would always be in the money."

The wheels of democracy were reinventing themselves. A nation had to be built. India had short-circuited the entire industrialization process and inherently become a services-led economy. This had brought its own challenges. Agriculture and industry together contributed only

about 40% to the GDP. They employed millions, but underemployed and underpaid them.

It was almost 1 p.m. when the meeting was called off, and the professors departed to their houses for lunch. To sit another day, another time at another venue perhaps!

THE WORKING OF A SECRETARY

Ajit's uncle was a high-up authority in the bureaucracy. He was an under-secretary in the Irrigation Department of the Government of Bihar. He was posted in Gaya District. He was affectionately called Bade Chachu (elder uncle) by Ajit. He was older to Ajit's father by just a couple of years and still had a few years to go before he retired from his services. His date of birth might have been tampered with during his school admission.

Ajit's father had no such luck, for he retired as soon as he was 58. Currently, he was 61. His elder brother Ravi Kumar was only 57 officially. He would probably retire the next year. There were talks in the government for an increase of at least two years for bureaucrats. They could not have been happier. Their job timings were from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. with multiple breaks in between. As soon as one arrived, it was already teatime. Twenty minutes of teatime passed by quickly. Lunch was early. Most bureaucrats would generally have lunch at around 1 p.m. They could not wait any longer. Lunch sessions were generally extended into a discussion time over the table, which could be up to an hour and a half. Then it was time for a siesta. The *Babu*s would take a quick nap in their chambers. Others had their dusty desks. Some files would be dusted off and a few would move if relevant palms had been greased appropriately. Others would again bite dust.

But not everyone in the bureaucracy was like that. There were some knights in shining armor. They would move the system diligently. They would create new schemes and get the same approved. They would utilize all opportunities to use up international funding and loans. They would create business and social presentations just like any CEO would. They would get their plans approved. Every job has its good, bad, and the ugly.

Ravi was one such bureaucrat. He wanted to do some genuinely good work for the farmers. He wanted to see them doing well for themselves despite the drought and the recurring floods. A couple of years ago, he was in the

limelight as one of his pet programs had received funding from a large American NGO. He had basked in that glory for days. But he was aware of the challenges. Apart from the Ministry, there were several people to be pleased. Contracts had to be awarded. A crowding out of genuine contractors would happen for fear of the *gundas* (goons). The crony contractors with muscle power would get the jobs unchallenged. There was only so much one could do as an under-secretary with a million-dollar funding.

He was able to do some work in Gaya. Out of every rupee spent, 10 paisa went into genuine work, while 90 paisa went down the large hands of bureaucracy, politicians, local goons, and the police alike. Ravi was still pleased with his 24 km long narrow canal. It had brought water to at least a hundred thousand farmers. The lives of those farmers would never be the same again. They would not die of huge unpayable loans with high interest. They could produce twice as much and sell it in the city market at government determined MSPs (Minimum Support Prices). They could now think of slowly mechanizing their farms with the continuous flow of hard-earned money. Their children could go to the village school and look forward to higher education.

But like all good people, Ravi had a vice too. He looked for pleasure in the company of young girls. On this engagement occasion, however, he had come as the *Bade Chachu*. He was a respectable man. He got a lot of respect from the *sharaatis*. Biharis tend to give a lot of respect to the *lal batti gaadis* (cars with red beacons). He had an Ambassador car with a red beacon. The government rules might have allowed him only a yellow beacon car, but the police or the bureaucracy does not care! A red beacon it had to be. He was after all a promote(e) IAS officer.

Raja had instructed his men to take special care of his elder *Samdhi ji*. His elder *Samdhan Sahiba*, Sheila, could not attend the function as she was not well. She had promised to attend the wedding for sure.

DISPERSE TO MEET AGAIN

July 2014

After lunch, the crowd began to disperse. People had to return to their karmabhoomi, the places of their work. They left with the reminder that events like these genuinely brought pleasure. One connected with their folks only during such ceremonies. They gave an added dimension to the work life of most people and created opportunities at a very primary level for work-life balance. Long-lost relatives and friends connected, which kept the relationships going.

Amrita had to take the afternoon flight to Mumbai. She was to leave within an hour or so. But Khushbu wanted her to stay at least for a couple of days. She could not spend enough time with her best friend. She had so much to talk! She needed to spend some quality time with Amrita.

They huddled in a room. Amrita told her about her confusion, the matter of the dowry. Khushbu was stoic in her silence. She believed Ajit's family was decent and Ajit obviously was a self-made man. He could be egoistic as most Bihari men are, and he must have wanted otherwise. Was there anything more to it? May not be. Over the years, across the country, dowry was loathed. It has more to do with women's rights and a higher percentage of love marriages. Arranged marriages, it seems, are few and far between. Women emancipation has become the new buzz word. Then how could well-read youngsters in Bihar stay aloof from the views being debated and discussed threadbare on national television? The Bihari youth was a part of the so-called national awakening. It was an awakening against the ills in the society. It was an awakening against dowry. There was an awakening towards cleanliness through Modi ji's *Swachhta Abhiyan* (Cleanliness Drive). There was an awakening for equal rights for men and women. There was an awakening for equal rights for Dalits and backward castes. There was an awakening about the 'right to food,' the 'right to education' and the much required 'right to work.'

Amrita had obviously seen more men than Khushbu. She was convinced that something was not quite right. There had to be an explanation. She, however, did not discuss the topic threadbare with Khushbu, fearing that she may have unnerved her best friend. She thought she would dig deeper. Now that she had Vivek firmly in her grasp, she would keep a close tab. Vivek was waiting outside to meet Amrita. They had become good friends, so she told Khushbu. He would go along with her to drop her at the airport.

With a heavy heart, she left for the airport with Vivek in tow. Khushbu was anxious, sad, and nonplussed. Amrita's social profile started getting multiple posts. An entire event had to be captured for her fans.

MUMBAI

15 August 2014

The country was in a celebratory mode. This was the day that India had achieved her freedom from the tyranny of the British Empire. That was in the august year of 1947 on August the 15th. For 21st century kids, all that matters is that it is a holiday. They do not have any inkling about the innumerable lives laid down by young adults for this azaadi (freedom). It was an azaadi from oppression and from the foreign forces who were hell-bent on drying up the Sone ki Chidiya (golden bird) as India was called before the imperial powers landed on its shores.

The air was filled with Hindi movie songs that promoted patriotism. Songs from Manoj Kumar's movies floated in the air. He was there on the television channels. He was there on FM radio as well. The songs were being blared on loudspeakers. They were everywhere.

Amrita was happy. She did not have to attend office. She wanted a day's rest. She wanted to go easy on herself. She wanted to relax and to calm down. It was long since she had spoken to Khushbu. She thought that it was the right day to call her up. She could show some patience towards her best friend. She could understand her thoughts better. She could do some probing as well.

Amrita called up Khushbu. Khushbu picked up the call with a start. She was cheerful, and she expected Amrita's call. She knew her best friend was only a call away. She did not call enough as she had long days at office. What others achieved at fifty, Amrita wished to accomplish at 30. That was the speed at which she operated. That was her desire. She was working to a plan. She was working on herself academically and professionally and on her persona. Things would just happen for Amrita. Doors would just open. It was not a fairy tale ride though. It was politics in profession. It was dirty

and mean politics at play. But winning was a habit for Amrita. The means did not matter, the ends alone mattered.

Amrita was diligent. She was foxy and brilliant. She had nothing to lose. If she could accomplish what she had set out to achieve, she would be venerated and haloed. If she did not achieve it, she could still have run a distance and retire happily at 35. She had a clear long- term plan to implement. She had her tactical plans in place. They were well-defined and with man-markings like a lioness on prowl. These plans were sinewy and muscular. Jaw for some tooth kinds. She was raw in her energy and politically expedient. Get-out-or-face-me- in-the-eye type.

With all her brilliance, however, Amrita hoped against hope, that her thoughts about Ajit and his family may not turn out to be right. By any design, human or otherworldly. For, her friend Khushbu was a sweet little angel. She deserved the best in her life. Marriage was an important milestone in life. Her friend needed to come out with flying colors. She may need some coaching into men and their habits. Amrita thought she needed to coach Khushbu a little more. Her innocence might not work. It was a big bad world out there. She had to face the in-laws and the cousins. They could be demanding.

Apart from training in some culinary skills, she needed the power of frank assessment, not diminished by her love for her husband and his family. She needed to have the power of judgment and inference. The assimilation of a girl post marriage was as much an art as it was a science. Take a few blows. Give it back if you must! It starts with the husband. Then it goes to the mother-in-law. It generally goes past the not-so- nosy father-in-law. It may be a traditional practice to give it back to the sister-in-law. Give it back, she must! One had to design the warfare. It was all in the mind. Play it and orchestrate it well. You win and the family wins as well. The unnecessary ragging ends and life blossoms. Everyone behaves better and people are content.

Her chat with Khushbu had left her pleased. Yearning for more. It was always good to speak to Khushbu. Her charm percolated to the listener at the other end of the physical telephonic conversation. Life was simple.

People of modest means could also find happiness. Relationships could provide so much comfort. Failed relationships could be a source of a constant heartburn. They hurt deep within. One can feel the pain. Amrita could feel the pain. She was hollow. Deep within. She was the story of failed relationships to the extent that she hated the word 'relationships.'

Khushbu's friendship was liberating for her. She would have felt so deprived otherwise. But for Khushbu, she might have lost all her worldly desires. Khushbu ignited in her a sense of belonging. She called her 'her life'. She cared for her. She always meant well for her. She was protective towards Khushbu like nobody's business. She could go to any lengths to keep her safe. Vivek was just a decoy. She wanted to penetrate in deep. She could have planted cameras in Ajit's house. She could have also sent Vivek to Ajit's home more often, unannounced, in a matter-of-fact manner. This would help her gather some more information about Ajit and his family members. She wanted to know more about their tastes and preferences, their attitudes on matters big and small, and their worldview.

Perhaps she was getting paranoid. Khushbu spoke with Ajit daily. She was slowly learning the ropes. She was collecting and processing information for herself. She was analyzing and dissecting all collected information. She would pass on some of the information to her parents for their consumption and analysis. She would also pass the entire information to Amrita for her analysis. Perhaps she was thinking too much. Perhaps Ajit's family was genuinely progressive despite their humble background. Perhaps Ajit was the force of change. Perhaps Khushbu had already broken the glass ceiling of the happily-married-ever-after life. Perhaps it was time for her to just go out and soak in the fresh air and some patriotic songs.

A DAY IN THE PARK

15 August 2014

Amrita decided to go out for a while. She needed to de-clutter her mind, to cleanse her thoughts. Yoga might help. A jog in the park? It was an ideal day. She wore her jogging outfit and ran out. It was 4.30 p.m. It was not sunny. Fearing that the weather might play foul, she carried an umbrella and a bottle of mineral water.

She was in Andheri West, the modernized part of the city, and a sought-after location. Though it is on the outskirts of the main Mumbai area, it is still a part of the city. Many businessmen and movie stars have made it their home. They might be Grade-B movie stars or television artists, but they are artists and carry an aura around themselves. The roads in this part of the city are upmarket. It has a municipal park, though not a large one. It is small and cozy. One cannot get lost there.

Amrita reached the park, jogging. It was minutes away from her apartment. Her apartment was highly secure and well-maintained. It was on a corporate lease and her company paid the rent. Amrita was climbing the corporate ladder, multiple steps at a time. Her organization valued her intellectual and her other capabilities. She knew how to win. Her bosses realized, late in the day, that they had just been used and thrown in the bin.

This realization was always late. By that time, they were already in a coma of sorts. Depleted of their energy and their will to win. Literally and figuratively. She would jump positions. She would keep her feet on her bosses, trample them, and climb on top. In their bed as well as their professions. She would then discard them as used condoms in the bin —dustbin. They could only soothe their hurt and think of avenging themselves in future, if only her luck ran out one day. They, however, could not affect her performance. The reporting relationships would change.

This MNC IT Company was aggressively entering the Indian market. They were a large brand globally. In India, they were simply not present. They had been a decade too late in India. They had been slow to get going. They needed people with a strong personality and refined sales skills. People with a penchant for the big game. Amrita was being monitored closely by their global HR. By now, they had mapped her skill sets. They were not necessarily in sync with her way of doing business, but they were willing to ignore her politicking within the organization, for her stupendous growth. The HR would normally ignore her ingenious methods. They would possibly create in her the next big marketer. She was cool, calm, calculative and deadly. She had nerves of steel. She was the last person to be dissuaded by a lack of motivation. She was in the power game. Pelf would follow. She was not overtly worried about money. If she kept rising vertically, money would chase her. Clients would also chase her, and business would be for her asking.

Amrita believed in keeping herself fighting fit. She would keep on with her job as it was going on now. She would do some weight training. She would take care of what she ate. Her diet was high in proteins and low on carbs. Was it a fad? American health magazines were shouting over each other, giving all brownie points to a diet full of proteins and low on carbs. She was not much into sugary savories; just give into the temptation once a while. She could not resist dark chocolate pastry. She was undergoing a Yogic transformation. Meditation, gym, and jogging took her ten odd hours a week.

It helped increase her concentration immensely. She could sit through important meetings for hours on end. It helped her de- stress. Yoga helped her cleanse her body and her soul. It also increased her passion and lust for life. She could avoid the thoughts of her failed relationships. She could ignore the pain of child abuse. That was a deep scar in her life, buried deep within her. She had undergone the worst possible time of her life as a preteen.

KANHA

1996

The Kanha Tiger Reserve, also known as the Kanha National Park, was established in 1955. It was established with a view to conserving the biodiversity and the flora and fauna of a large area of almost a thousand square kilometers. The reserve has a fair population of tigers, leopards, sloth bears, barasingha and Indian wild dogs. It also has the barking deer. Rudyard Kipling got his inspiration from the sal and bamboo forests of Kanha. This was where he wrote his now famous novel, The Jungle Book.

Kanha is in central India. It is a part of the Hindi heartland of India. It is home to the Baiga and Gond tribes. The Baiga tribe has traditionally managed the tigers' habitat over generations. They worship tigers as their gods. When they were displaced out of the core area of the National Park, they shifted just outside the park area. The Baigas know the art of survival. They are the go-to men for the conservationists and the Reserve Guards. The Baigas can point with accuracy the location of a tiger. They can typically interpret the sounds of animals and the chirping of birds to locate tigers. If medical help was needed for a tiger, the medics would look for the Baigas.

Baigas are semi-nomadic. They travel fair distances in groups in search of food. They are nature lovers.

Their existence shows the gift of Mother Nature. Their lives are dedicated to the preservation of Mother Nature in all her forms. They are a tribe of calm people. Equanimity is their strength. They live pure lives and eat pure organic food. They are not into farming. They do not till soil. They believe that the act goes against the grain of Mother Earth. When they were within the core area of Kanha, they were never deprived of food or fuel; the forests provided for them. However, since their large-scale displacement, they have had to look for food outside.

These tribes stay in small villages in penury, in complete distress now. The name Baiga means ‘sorcerer’. Baiga men were magicians and sorcerers. They have deep knowledge of Ayurveda as practised by their ancestors over centuries. The Baigas raise pigs, poultry, goats, and cattle. They also keep dogs and cats. Fish and all kinds of meat are consumed. They hunt rats and consume eggs. They prepare the seeds for the Gond tribe of the region. The Gonds are agriculturists. They depend heavily on the Baigas for their medicinal and plant knowledge. The Baiga men also protect the other local tribesmen from illness and disease.

One such local Baiga was Ranu. Ranu Baiga was a lean, muscular guy. He was of a wheatish complexion but had a charm of his own. He was hardly eighteen but was recently married to a Gond tribal girl named Kalki, who was just fourteen. She had had to go through a religious ceremony to convert into a Baiga. It was a difficult process—of being tattooed. A ‘V’ was carved on her forehead. Her cheeks had a few lines and dots.

Her arms and legs were also tattooed. Her belly button was pierced, and a small ring was inserted into it aesthetically. She had a fair skin and looked charming. Her skin glowed in the light.

Her sister, all of seven, was also brought to the village as a relative. She was Akki Gond. Sharp eyes. She was mischievous and demanding. She was the cynosure of Kalki’s eyes. Ranu also liked her as much. He would play with her often in his free time. He was a medicine man. He would teach her medicine and all that he knew about the changing landscapes of the world. He would teach her about tigers, lions, and leopards. He had her admitted to the local government school. She was catching up fast. She did not have her parents. Her father had died in an accident a couple of years ago. Her mother had died of measles. She could not find a Baiga then. Ever since, her sister had decided that if she were to ever marry, she would marry a Baiga.

Akki’s school master was happy with her progress. He spoke to Kalki one day and told her that she should get Akki admitted to a State Government-aided school in the nearby town of Jabalpur. The school was in the STC Sadar region. He gave her a recommendation letter addressed to the Principal of the school. Akki was to go for her

secondary studies to the Jabalpur- based school. It was a cause for celebration. A party was thrown by Ranu for the village-folk. It was a big event. His *saali* (sister-in-law) was going to be the first girl to go to a big school. There was loud music and festivities galore. Four goats were sacrificed.

RANCHI

30 September 2014

The richest cricketer list had just been published. A Ranchi lad, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, had been named as the richest cricketer in the world by virtue of his prize money and his advertising revenues. He was billed at $23 million, ahead of the God of Cricket, Sachin Tendulkar. Tendulkar was at $18.6 million. As the news caught on, it became the main discussion point for the Ranchiites. People were basking in Dhoni's reflected glory. A small-town cricketer had achieved so much for himself and for the country in world cricket.

Raja was also fond of Dhoni and his exploits. Raja was happy, and he decided to celebrate the occasion with a family outing and dinner. They were a happy family. They would go to a nearby restaurant in the Kanke Road area to celebrate.

Khushbu was happy. She was getting to know more about Ajit and his family. She could guess Ajit's thought process. His manner of talking pleased her. He might not be romantic, but he was caring for sure. He cared for her. He cared for his in-law's preferences as well. He wanted to understand more of her. They would connect for over an hour at 11 p.m. almost every night. This chatting was having a salutary effect on her. She was glowing, dreaming of Ajit already. She could feel his presence around her. She was in a state of 'arranged' love.

Ajit was a doer. He was not a thinker at his level. He could execute plans well. He was the go-to guy for his boss for various execution deadlines. Ajit was good at presentations. He had a good command over MS Office suite of products. He had learnt his lessons well at his PG Diploma College. He was self-motivated. He wished to go up the corporate ladder fast but in the right manner by sheer dint of labor. He believed that luck favored those who worked hard. He was sincere and honest. He could see the Area Manager's chair becoming his, within a couple of well-spent years. In

FMCG companies, Area Managers were of all varieties. Middle-aged people slowly graduated to Area Managers via multiple junior levels. MBAs could start directly at a slightly higher level and with good performance, move quickly to the same position as many middle-aged managers. MBAs from the IIMs (Indian Institute of Management) would have an even quicker upward trajectory. They could become Area Managers within a year of training.

Ajit was doing perceptively well in his role. It was a mammoth organization. His work was being complimented by his managers. The same was being documented by the HR. He had picked up speed in his work. He was being tasked with important locational missions. He was enjoying his work.

He was also enjoying his time on call with Khushbu. She was a good girl with a decent academic background and a good social grounding. Her upbringing was better than his. He had gone through his share of ups and downs. However, his parents had given him good education, the best they could. It was up to him now to create a high-flying career for himself. It would have made him very happy if Khushbu were to take up a job too, in her field of interest.

He was now eagerly waiting for the wedding. He was happy to have met her. He could not have asked for more. He was aware that *Bade Chachu* had done a lot for his father. During his difficult times, *Bade Chachu* had supported the family. He had always felt *Chachu* was a good soul and he was just doing his responsibility. His parents had once told him that his uncle was a good man, but he was not without his limitations and vices. They had forewarned him that his *Chachu* had never asked for any favors in the past, but he might ask for one in future. He was doing well for himself and would probably not ask for monetary favors, but he might ask for some other favor at an appropriate time. They hoped they were able to come up and justify their being at that time of calling. They had to return the favor when called for. They would die of shame if they could not. In fact, they were surprised as to why *Bade Chachu* hadn't asked for Ajit as a husband for his colleague's daughter. He had brought her proposal earlier, but Ajit's parents hadn't really liked the girl. However, if the favor had been called out, they would have been bound. That did not happen as *Chachu* did not stress on it. He was apparently happy at the choice of Khushbu. She had

become the cynosure of the eyes of all the relatives and friends of Ajit's family.

Ajit discussed this fact with Khushbu one day. He told her the entire story in a passing reference. Khushbu was glad that *Bade Chachu* was such a gentleman. She was reassured that the family was noble, and they cared for one another. They were dependable and could count on the other in times of a crisis. Family values were still intact in certain states of India. Westernization has ensured the breaking up of joint families, but some families still respect one another and are available in times of need.

ACHCHE DIN: THE DRAWING ROOM DISCUSSION

18 October 2014

Pramod babu, Binod babu, Prof Sharma, and Dr Srivastava met at the latter's house for a conversation over a cup of tea. At their septuagenarian age, they were not cynical. They wanted the best for India's future, and knew that the fallacies of her glorious past could not be undone.

Pramod *babu* began, "More than due to westernization, families are shrinking because of migration for employment. Economy-wide crisis is taking shape. Jobs are few and far between. India is on the cusp of a change."

Prof Sharma said, "Sinha Saheb, Modi ji won the elections on the promise of '*Achche din*.' *Achche din wapas aayenge*. Good days will return. Modi ji has promised ease of doing business. He has promised new jobs by the millions, and not necessarily in the government. Policy initiatives must be aligned towards job creation in the private sector."

Dr Srivastava intervened, "Imagine skilled and semi- skilled workers coming in hordes into the labor market and the country unable to create jobs. Somehow, over the years, as an economy we have moved from the agrarian mode directly to the services mode. We have bypassed the mega-industrialization that mature economies saw. China saw the same as much as South East Asian economies. Can we provide for our teeming millions in a Services led economy alone? India needs a well-curated strategy for her future. If she cannot provide enough jobs over the next decade or so, there will be massive social unrest."

"You are absolutely right, Srivastava Saheb," said Binod *babu*. "Most Indian cities are expanding in all directions. The distinction between a city, its outskirts, and the nearby town are fading. If one travels by road from Delhi to Shimla, for example, they may not see landscapes or

rivers or agricultural fields at all. They would see a continuity of malls and housing complexes. Migration to cities is taking place at an innumerable speed. India needs to surge ahead at Godspeed, more than it did at any time in the past. A concentrated attempt towards re-industrialization may just be our future. Implementation is key."

Prof Sharma nodded in agreement and furthered the argument by saying, "Our bureaucrats need to be trained in business institutes as well. They need to understand and appreciate the challenges better. Modi ji came to power with the promise of *'Na khaunga, na khane doonga.'* (Neither will I partake in corruption, nor will I allow anyone else to.) He has promised to erase black money from the system. Graft needs to be minimized in public."

Ramu brings in tea with some biscuits. He serves it to the three gentlemen and leaves them to their hot discussion.

Dr Srivastava, who was a Hindi prose enthusiast, said, "Most Indian states are doing well now. There's competition amongst them for higher growth and better quality of life. Bihar is the frontrunner in terms of its overall growth rate. Its low earlier base may have helped but the fact is that the growth rate has been sustained for more than a few years now.

Bihar still needs at least two decades of reform and a higher level of growth in its economy. Bihar was one of the best administered states in the 1950s. Bengal was one of the preeminent states. In independent India, the western and the southern states took a leap into the modernization campaign. Somehow, the eastern and the central states of the Hindi heartland fell prey to regionalism, parochial vision of successive governments, Maoism, and a competitive destruction of law and order."

"You are right, Srivastava Saheb," concurred Prof Sharma. "The effects are there for all to see. By the time these states realized their narrative was at a fault, a chasm was already created. It was now East vs West, within India.

A similar thing was happening at the global level. The western countries saw the fruits of industrialization and an open economy.

The eastern states were somehow still plunged in Maoism and nepotism. The western economies matured, while the east was still developing."

Dr Srivastava added, "Similar efforts were desirable within India from the eastern and the north-eastern states. Post Y2K (Year 2000), some of these states started on the path of reform and encouragement of business. Over the years, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar have done quite well on multiple parameters. Farmer suicides decreased across the better managed states of India. Bengal continued with its dogged resistance to reforms. Didi overthrew the three-decade rule of CPI and CPM (communist parties of India) in West Bengal. However, she became the poster girl for the annihilation of large industries. The Tata Nano experience was there for all to see. It may not have done many great things for Bengal, but at least it succeeded in overthrowing a powerful regime. Democracy had won and that was important. Bengal would live another day to create good infrastructure and policies and bring in a wave of industrialization. The effort has begun."

Pramod *babu* picked up the thread, "Bihar is in the throes of change. The path is difficult and mired in multiple socioeconomic and political problems. But law and order situation has improved. Cars are flying off the shelves. Bihar needs a lot of investment. The famous Bihari labor migration is slowly reducing. Labor needs to be skilled. The sugar factories need to be opened once again and run profitably by private enterprise."

"Let's disperse for today," said Dr Srivastava. "Have some work to do. I need to pen down my thoughts for an article for a Hindi publication today."

Pramod *babu* made the last remark, "I have nearly lost my voice to hyperthyroidism. I used to teach students in a class of three hundred. We never had access to microphones back then, but we commanded respect even from the backbenchers. In my heydays, I could have taught a lesson or two to the shouting brigade on the TV news channels."

They dispersed bidding goodbye to one another… to meet again!

JABALPUR

April 1998

Akki Gond was a good student. She was the monitor of her class. She was active in dramatics. She would often represent her class in public speaking and poem narration at the age of 9. Std. IV was turning out to be a good year for her in academics. She had quite a following among her fellow students. She was the preferred student by her class teacher, Mrs. Sen, and by a few other teachers as well.

The school was to host the Education Secretary of the State of Madhya Pradesh. The date was fast approaching. A few skits and a couple of patriotic songs had been prepared by the students. Akki was to represent her class in a skit which had a mix of students from various classes. She was happy with the way the drama was shaping up. Hers was a child's role and she was confident of putting up a good performance.

On the 21st of April 1998, the school was all decked up. Teachers were in their best clothes. Students had been permitted to wear colored dresses. Akki was in her child character's uniform, a micro skirt, and a crop top. Her hair was done in a pony and she had applied rouge on her cheeks. Her ears had multiple piercings and she had obliged herself with three earrings each. She looked a stunner. As were many other kids in their best outfits, she had a neutral colored armband and a Gond pendant reflecting her tribe. She was from a Scheduled Tribe (ST) and was happy to display it with pride. She did not have any inhibitions. She exuded unhindered charm.

The Secretary took to stage amidst huge fanfare. He lighted the candles and inaugurated the event. He gave a short speech on the importance of education and all that the State Government was doing in the sector. He made a few promises of funding for the school for its various

requirements. He left the stage and was seated in the front and the only sofa row.

The celebrations began. Amidst dramas, dance dramas, and songs, the Secretary was served with authentic non-vegetarian snacks. He enjoyed the evening. He was seated next to the acting Principal of the School. He was Ramesh Sharma, better known as Guruji in the school and in the city. He was a good teacher of Chemistry and a great administrator. He was a tall, lanky man with hawk-eyed features and well-formed jawbones. He was in his mid-forties and a widower. His children were studying in a school in Delhi and he was proud of their performance.

The Secretary, Tewari, was a short and stout character, slightly dark in complexion. He was well-dressed and carried himself with an air of superiority. IAS officers in India have always been the Raj favorites. In the days of the British, they were with the ICS, Indian Civil Services, and they had all the powers at their command which were bestowed on them by the Queen of the British Empire. One had to compete in the exams in England to become an ICS officer. IAS officers carried a similar ego though their powers were slightly controlled and tempered. In any case, they were not the ruling elite. They were the servants of the common Indian. There was a complete change in approach that the constitutional heads and our earlier proponents of the State had proposed. A soft skills training was required for the IAS officers. They had to be subservient to the needs and aspirations of the common Indian.

But that was not to be. The clique of successive batches of IAS officers amassed huge powers from an inept political class. They would eventually amass huge wealth. Corruption and nepotism became all pervasive and a black economy, which some economists describe to be of the size of the recorded economy, eventually developed. Governance was made very difficult and an archaic concept. The Government turned out to be big and all pervasive. The serving class amassed the role of the ruling class. Tewari was one of the sane cadres of the so-called neo-ruling elite of India—the largest democracy in the world, active and noisy.

The performance ended with much fanfare. Tewari was escorted to the Principal's chamber. He told Guruji that he had particularly liked the performance of one little girl. Akki was called to the Principal's chamber. Her teacher Mrs. Sen brought Akki Gond herself. Tewari complimented Akki and her teacher on Akki's performance. He was left thoroughly impressed. Guruji asked Mrs. Sen to oversee the dinner arrangements and to leave the child in the chamber. Mrs. Sen was not happy with the way the events were unfolding, but she had to leave. Akki was left scarred that evening, in a temple of modern-day education by the priest of modern-day democracy. Such was the power of the state; she could not even let out a cry. She could only sob for long after that evening. Mrs. Sen could only soothe her. She understood her pain and counselled her. She went in as much as to accost Guruji. Guruji was at first pensive and then defensive. All he could say was sorry. He, however, counselled Akki to be a brave girl. She had to be fearless to take on this big bad world.

GAYA

15 October 2014

Ravi was in a fix. He was under tremendous pressure. His Secretary on deputation, Ghanshyam, was coming on a day's visit to the town. Ravi had to take him around his field of work, duly impress him and get funding for his pet projects. Ravi was a man on a mission. He wished to leave a legacy. He wanted to be known as a diligent officer who did a lot for his area of work.

Ghanshyam arrived around noon in a cavalcade of SUVs and cars. His red beaconed Innova was nicely decked up. Ghanshyam was welcomed by the field officers including Ravi. He saw farmers deriving the benefits of canal water irrigation. They were obviously better off than multitudes of farmers across the country. Ghanshyam had visited the Sardar Sarobar Canal earlier as part of his training. He knew Ravi was doing a good job and needed his full support. He was man-marking within his senior departmental colleagues. Ravi would be one of his personal favorites in times to come.

Ghanshyam asked Ravi, "Looks like you have implemented quite a few projects in this part of the district. How did you do so?"

Ravi, filled with pride, said, "Thank you for your compliment, sir. This is the result of a lot of hard work by my engineers and other staff. It has taken a lot of effort. Even the funding was difficult to come by."

Ghanshyam was duly impressed. "So, haven't you done anything? Is it only your team that has done everything? Why are you being so humble? IAS officers are known to be egotists. You do not seem to be so. What's the matter?"

Ravi was already blushing with the praise showered upon him by his senior. He said, "Sir, you know a thing or two about man-management. You are giving me so much credit for the work done by my team. A man in the field is as good as his team—I genuinely believe in that

maxim. Also, I wish to ask you for a favor. We have created a new project to focus our energy on rainwater harvesting. As you are so aware, the water- table in this part of the country is descending. The current methods of harvesting are not being properly implemented. I have spoken to a couple of genius scientists in this field, including people from our Agriculture College in Patna."

"Hey man, cut it short now!" Ghanshyam said. "I was praising you for the work you have already done. I am sure you have new plans for the region. Give me some time. I need to meet with a few farmers here. I wish to understand the problems that you faced with the budgets for the project. I am sure you faced multiple issues in implementing the project as you must have had to grease multiple palms in the process. Did it not make you feel why you should take such pains for the government's job?"

Ravi turned reflective and said, "Sir, to be honest, there were a lot of issues in achieving what we have been able to. You are completely accurate in your assessment. However, I wish to, under your kind supervision, leave a legacy in the location. I wish to achieve what others set out to do in the past, but due to sheer work and the process-led issues involved, I never seriously moved the venture ahead. I wish to complete another good project for the location. It would not only improve the water table; it would also bring Mother Earth some succor in form of more water in bad years."

Ghanshyam was starting to like this man already. He proceeded to meet some villagers. They were mostly farmers and they were happy to see the *Bada Sahib*. They welcomed him with garlands. They were aware that if this *Bada Sahib* wanted, their area would be better cared for and new project implementations could happen. They were in full support of Ravi's initiatives and egged him on to be more aggressive with his boss. Ravi was a senior and a seasoned professional. He knew that the only way to get money and project sanctions from his big boss was to keep his ego assuaged and keep him happy. He had big plans for the evening *jalsa* (celebrations).

After a long day's work, the *sahibs* were taken to the village maidan. It was already decked up with a *shamiyana* (a large tent). They were seated on charpoys. Hookahs were provided to the *sahibs*. A local

dance was organized by the village folk. *Litti-chokha*, a famous Bihari dish, was served with generous dollops of ghee. Ghanshyam was in for a long evening and he was enjoying it immensely. Ravi could see that Ghanshyam was jubilant and was getting into a mood for the party. He then brought out the fine Australian Beer. Ravi could typically understand by his gestures that Ghanshyam longed for something else as well, something special in this part of the country. He wanted to catch hold of a *chhamiya* (girl). The songs being sung were in a hyperbole. The lyrics were difficult to understand as they were in the local dialect. It was not Hindi for purists. Bihar is a part of the Hindi heartland, but Bihar has multiple local languages and dialects. All these dialects are derived from Hindi but have their distinct style.

The revelers were singing Bhojpuri songs and dancing in rhythm. The evening was still young, and a lot could happen. Ghanshyam was served many more local dishes. He loved the experience. The evening was one to remember. The village elders were happy to organize this show for him. No stone was left unturned. Ghanshyam wished to rest. A neat room was reserved for him in the state guesthouse. He was led there, helped by Ravi and his team members. A *nautanki bai* (small-time actress) was asked to take good care of him. She was left at his room and the menfolk left.

Ravi went back home, amused, and happy at the way the day had unfolded. He knew he had Ghanshyam in his grips. It was not very difficult. If someone enjoyed alcohol and girls, one could extract a good mileage from the person. Ravi anyway did not want anything great for himself. All he wanted was to get the relevant approvals for his projects. He wanted a boss who could take care of his requirements for funding. The boss had to deal with multiple channels and agencies in multilateral forum to get such approvals. Typically, a World Bank or an IMF funding would be easy. However, getting funding from NGOs was not easy. It required assiduous planning and coaching. It also required a lot of legwork. However, Ghanshyam's approval would be required for the same. He was glad that he had taken care of Ghanshyam fully well. He knew, in his heart of hearts, that his work would get done. The first step was rightly placed.

MUMBAI

29 October 2014

"Amrita, what is this? Why are you in such a foul mood? Your mood swings are getting on my nerves now, I tell you. You are a fine woman. You need to, however, take care of yourself. Is there something that's causing this irritation? Are you hiding something from me? I guess, I am your partner in infidelity and in work. We should talk if there's something that's troubling you."

"*Gyan mat do* (Don't try to educate me). I can walk out if you don't like me. I have done that to many other lecherous infidels in the past as well. How the hell do you have the guts to call me an infidel? I am not married, and I am definitely not cheating on anyone when I sleep in your bed on you."

Surana was perplexed. 'Why is this woman behaving like this?' he asked himself. She may have been after a big fish for all he knew. She was happy preying on people better placed than her. He was just a small fry. She liked to be with him whenever she wanted to. He could not predict when and where, but he knew she would be back when she felt like it. She needed a sounding board who could understand her when she needed it the most. It was a convenient relationship.

For Amrita, Surana was just a toy who could be manipulated in different ways; the best part being that he did not mind it at all. She was by now far above Surana in the hierarchy, so he did not mind being overpowered or overtaken. She had a stronger libido and he would always try to satisfy her. He knew that she was dangerous for people above her in the hierarchy but not as much for people below her. She treated her juniors with affection and a slight disdain.

"Surana, can you figure out what Cockpit is up to these days? He seems to have completely gone into a cocoon. He doesn't interact

often, not just with me but with anybody. What's the matter?" Amrita asked as she was thinking aloud.

Surana could understand the context. Mr. Amit Khandelwal alias Cockpit was in a different world altogether, it seemed. But he thought as much. Cockpit was onto something big. Either he was on his way out or he was planning to do something big on the work front. All employees were aware that a war was on in the office and it was a high stakes war. No one was secure.

Amidst this insecurity of who overtook whom, Amrita had had a field day so far. She had been overtaking people due to her doggedness, smartness, wit, and a deep resolve to perform. She had also been able to sleep with men and go past them in this game.

But Cockpit was turning out to be a difficult person. He was not giving in to Amrita's charm and appeal. She had tried but her luck was fast running out. Some men are smart. If they need sex, they look outside the office for the same. They would not get involved intra-office. Getting involved with people within the office compromises work and professional relationships. Often it leads to incoherent decision-making leading to ill-gotten favors. It clouds judgement.

Cockpit was a 48-year-old tall, lean, and handsome person with a charming personality. He was known to have been witty in the past. Few Indians are witty. Indians go overboard. They become illogical and act comic in an amateurish way. Few possess the silent wit of the Europeans. They can be funny at the expense of being overtly so. Indians are mostly not humorous. They do not understand humor well enough. They do not find humor in melancholy poems. They create offensive humor. They labor to create wit. Quite an intriguing quality to miss out on in such a powerful country of people!

Cockpit was a self-made man and was now doing quite well for himself. He may not have been the ideal future CEO for the organization, but he was a prime resource. India has a huge population, but the acquired knowledge and skills desirable for many an enterprise are still difficult to be found. Organizations nurture talent for the long term. Cockpit, for sure, was one such nurtured talent. He was getting there in terms of his interpersonal skills and his knowledge of business.

His soft skills and his business skills were being toned through various interventions by the HR.

He was aware of his talent and ambitions. He was apolitical and was a leader who led from the front. He would carry a large part of the organization's business on his shoulders. He would handle key clients of the organization. He was the top Key Account Manager (KAM) for the organization.

Amrita had a deep respect for his intellectual and business capabilities. She knew he may have been her last prey. He had to be her last prey. That would have established her as the unchallenged leader under the Marketing & Sales Head of the organization. That gentleman was anyway going to retire soon, within a year or so. That would give her enough time to take over the present Head. That meant, she had to dislodge Cockpit from his position. He had to either do things suddenly that proved him to be a misfit for the role or she got him to do things incoherently. He had to be seen in poor light. His client and internal ratings were high, but they needed to start coming off and lose their sheen.

What could she do to counter this last straw? If she were to get overtly political, Cockpit would realize it and create a flanking strategy against her. She had to do certain things quickly but silently, without being seen to do nasty things. She had to dislodge him. The time was now! All her nasty work over the years would come to a naught otherwise. She was a fighter. She had to find that one chink in the armor.

Surana was not surprised. He would reflect on Amrita's game and be supportive of her. He thought, maybe because she had nothing to fear from him, his job was secure in the company despite the frenetic activity all around. Most employees were restive with this power game. They knew it was a high stakes game and they wanted to be neutral. They did not want to be seen by anyone on the other side of the spectrum. That could mean blacklisting and falling out of the other person's favor. Why risk one's job in this fight to the finish? Cockpit wasn't making it easy for her by any means. Up until then, she had used her personal charm and raw energy to cow down her managers into submission. But it was not to be. He was playing mind games with

her. He knew her secrets and methods. The other falling managers had given him enough knowledge of her superior methods. He was being combative. He did not want to be seduced into submission. He was staying aloof of her and focusing all his energies on his business.

He was doing well, for sure. His clients were going gaga on his style of managing their accounts. They were happy and it was showing in the top dollars that he brought in. He was a team player and was known to be one for a long time. His style of working had seen a subtle change. He had become more inward-looking and was handling all his clients himself, even for their minutest requirements. He did not seek any help from his team members. His juniors could feel this change in him. He was possibly being secretive too. A lot many things would come up in business meetings with top management. He would detail out his strategy and his execution parameters normally with all his team members.

Over the last few months, however, there had not been any core meeting on the strategy if at all he would discuss the individual strategy on each account with his team members. He would keep his strategy to himself. His team members would be surprised in senior management meetings as he would suddenly disclose plans that they were not aware of. That was disconcerting for them, but they could guess he was a changed man due to Amrita's machinations. He was just protecting his turf. He had every right to! He had given a large part of his career to this industry and he was one of the first executives of this organization in India. It was corporate intrigue at its best!

CHHATH

29 October 2014

Khushbu felt that the more she purchased, the more she fell short of a dangler here or a bangle there. Work never seemed to end. Alka seemed like she was in a fit and was working like a workhorse. She felt energetic and vibrant. She could do a lot more than Khushbu had ever seen. It was probably the happiness of her only daughter's wedding being accomplished. Alka was ageing well. She looked resplendent in her saris. She was a lanky woman in her late 50s and she always wore saris. In her prime, she might have been quite alike Khushbu. She was fair in complexion and had an attractive persona. She was a caring mother and quite a God-loving person. She was always busy, though.
A daughter's wedding is a big event in any society as much as it is in Bihar. It is possibly the biggest event in one's life after their own wedding. Parents go berserk in planning and the eventual execution. Not all executions come out well. Bihar has not seen too many event managers in this business. This is still in the turf of large clients based in the metro cities in India. Event management itself is not a well-known word in Bihar; there are no real professionals engaged in the business.

As such, tasks become difficult as the entire management of weddings and the other events pre- and post-wedding need to be taken care of by the girl's parents with their own resources. What complicates matters a bit is the numerous festivals in India. It was the day of the commencement of the holy festival of *Chhath*, with *Nahai-Khai*. The festival is celebrated through pujas over four days—starting with *Nahai- Khai, Kharna* on the second evening, *Pehla Arag* on the third, and *Dusra Arag* on the fourth morning. All these are done with extreme purity of mind, soul and purpose.

The person committing to the festival must sleep in a room that has been cleaned completely. It includes having vegetarian food initially and then complete fasting over the next two days. People go to a river

or a pond to give the *Arag* to the Sun God. Biharis pray to *Chhatthi Maiya* for health, wealth, and happiness. It is a difficult puja to perform and it goes by the age-old *Karmakand* method of prayers. This is one of the most pious festivals for the Biharis. It is also a pretty tough festival as it is full of prayers to the Lord with much ado.

It is now also celebrated all over Jharkhand and parts of UP. Biharis normally celebrate this festival wherever they are, globally.

Alka and Khushbu also had to attend the evening *kharna* (prasad). They were to go to their neighbors' place. The environment was electric, with loudspeakers blaring on full volume. *Ganga Maiya* and *Chhathi Maiya* songs were in the air.

Alka was used to typically rush in and out of the neighbors' house whenever she remembered any chore pertaining to her wedding. She was not in the habit of postponing anything for the next day. She was a firm believer in the maxim: *'Kal kare so aaj kar, aaj kare so ab, pal mein parlay hoega, kal karega kab?'* It meant, whatever one wishes to do tomorrow, they should do it today and if one wishes to do something today, they should do it right now. What if the world ends due to some calamity? How then would one achieve what they have set out to achieve for tomorrow?

Khushbu called up Amrita. They were chatting amidst the loud sounds and confusion in the neighbors' house. There was a lot of commotion there. A lot of people were coming to get some *prasad* for themselves and their family members. It was considered auspicious to have this *prasad*. Khushbu was telling a lot of stuff to Amrita who was the least interested in them. She wished to be able to listen to Khushbu, but she could not concentrate. She was somehow focusing on the job at hand. She had to get going on her plans with Cockpit. She needed to do something different as the normal scheme was not working. He was difficult to honey-trap and he was aware of her means and her methods. He knew the bloody end it would take him to.

Khushbu discussed the details of her wedding and their preparations threadbare with Amrita. Even though Amrita was concerned for the wellbeing of Khushbu, somehow, she had only limited ability to understand her presently. It was as crucial a time for her as for her best

friend. She had to create time on her calendar for the wedding as well. It would shave off a neat 3-4 days off her work at this imposing hour. She did not like the way this situation was developing. It was clumsy to begin with and it was thoroughly challenging her abilities to multitask.

All was well between Ajit and Khushbu. They were enjoying their courtship period and getting closer to each other. They could already feel for each other. These were the joys of arranged marriage. Khushbu was slowly getting used to the hour-long chats with Ajit. She would wait for the call through the day. She was cheerful. Alka was also reliving her old days by seeing her daughter in her new avatar. It was like a fairy tale unfolding in front of her. Prince Charming would talk about their future and the Princess would dream it up and behave in that fashion.

Amrita was thinking of an alternate strategy for Cockpit. She had disconnected the phone, having listened to Khushbu with half impatience. Suddenly, she sensed a half chance and got a wicked smile on her face. She wanted to go for the kill. Not immediately. She wanted to be in complete control of the masterplan. She did not want to act impetuously. She would take down the prey after meticulous planning and solid execution. She would probably do it after Khushbu's wedding to be doubly sure of her presence in the power centre.

PATNA

4 January 2015

Inspector Rajiv Kumar was convinced that Khushbu's death was a murder. It may not have been a dowry-related death, but it could have been a case of an abetment of suicide. He did not have any clear indications to help him, though. His case was falling apart. It was always easy to implicate the groom and his family. They were out on bail. He needed to prove that they were guilty; rather, he needed to prove the truth. Courts do not listen to stories. They need solid proof for conviction. The usual harassment provisions provided by the process of law weren't enough to get him to get the truth out of Ajit's family. The family was clear in their disposition that they were very happy and secure in their relationship with Khushbu. They were as devastated by the turn of events as Khushbu's parents were.

Raghu would also chip in their favor many a time. He believed it was not a dowry-related death. He kept a close watch on Ajit and his parents. He could sense their angst and complete devastation. He was sympathetic to Ajit by then.

But there was a crack in the case somewhere that they still needed to see. So far, they had come to a naught. Their investigation had slowed down, and it was giving Rajiv sleepless nights. He was not happy with the way it was turning out. He was also under pressure to perform and close the case soon. The courts were not happy to extend the dates of the hearings time and again. It was all building up. He had to perform for Amrita as well. She had been performing for him in his bed. She wanted to get to the bottom of this case. It was now personal for Rajiv. He had to come up with convincing answers.

This was his fourth meeting with Ajit and his parents. Ajit had lost his job and was at home at that time. His company had sacked him for his implication in the so- called dowry-related murder case. He had to get his name cleared to be able to get a new job. When failure comes, it comes in

abundance. Those who rise and walk are the ones who walk the distance. He had to prove that to himself and to the world. He had to prove it to his only erstwhile employer as well. He had been deeply in love with Khushbu and was shattered. He could not believe all that had happened. For him, she was his only love, though their companionship had been short. He could not come to terms with it.

Rajiv was trying to create the sequence of events of the case for the days leading up to Khushbu's death. He was speaking to Ajit's mother, Reeta. He asked her all sorts of mundane questions. He could sense her discomfort with the entire process. That he was not coming onto anything conclusive was creating a dissonance in him. During the conversation, Reeta suddenly mentioned that Khushbu had to go out a couple of times a week before the suicide. This was on the request of Ajit's *Bade Chachu*, Ravi. He wanted her to meet someone powerful. Reeta continued to tell Rajiv that as *Bade Bhaiya* had done so much for the entire family in the past, even monetarily, they knew he had a golden heart and that he might be trying to do something good for Khushbu. They felt it might have been for Khushbu's wellbeing or for her job that *Bade Bhaiya* had wanted to do something good.

Rajiv saw a small fissure and a possibility. He goaded Reeta to continue. Reeta mentioned that she did feel awkward as to why *Bade Bhaiya* had wanted Khushbu to meet someone powerful, but they simply went by the logic that he was the oldest in the family and he knew what was good for all. They did not have the gumption to question *Bade Bhaiya* anyway. They had, in fact, had asked Khushbu to always obey the family's elders and conform to the requirements. It was great that she had his blessings. Reeta was sure that the meetings were in the best interests of the family and that there was nothing to be investigated.

Rajiv closed the conversation. He could see a golden ray at the end of his tunnel vision. He wanted to meet up with Ravi. It would be difficult to do an open investigation with Ravi as he was a senior bureaucrat. Superior to him by miles in the hierarchy. It helped Ravi as he was now an IAS officer. Rajiv requested a meeting to be set up with Ravi. He wanted Ajit to set it up for him. Ajit readily agreed. He also thought once Rajiv was done with his investigations, they would all be free of that stigma and the process of

law. The police would rest its case and Ajit and his family would be exonerated from the proceedings.

Amitabh hastily mentioned, “Rajiv ji, please speak softly with Bade Bhaiya. He is a thorough gentleman and a hardworking no-nonsense public servant. He is honest and he has done a lot for the farmers of Gaya. People love him in his field of work, and he has a mass following in Gaya. Few IAS officers have his persona and charisma.”

Rajiv, hiding his glee, said, “Please do not worry, Mr Kumar. We are doing this to get this case off your back. Once we are through with the investigation, I am sure the culprits will be behind the bars and you will be off the hook.”

GAYA

7 January 2015

Rajiv was at Ravi's official bungalow. He was waiting for Ravi in the drawing room, who was supposed to return home at any moment. A cool and dry breeze blew outside, making it appear like an almost sub- zero temperature. There was an eerie silence in the area. These large bungalows usually had a couple of servants and the lady of the house.

A shabbily clad person appeared with a tray in hand. He appeared to be an *ardali* (a servant). He brought some snacks and a cup of hot tea. He kept the tray in front of the Inspector and walked away. Rajiv was happy to see freshly cooked *pyazi* (a fried snack) along with some dry fruits. He sipped on the tea.

As he dug his fingers into the pyazi, he heard the rumbling of an Ambassador. The Ambassador was the favorite means of communication for the higher echelons of the government. It was the only car fit for government duties as it could take the worst of roads and still give a decent level of comfort to the *saheb*.

"How are you, Inspector Saheb?" Ravi asked as he entered the drawing room.

"I am good. Thank you, sir!" said the Inspector.

"What brings you here?" Ravi's tone was mocking.

"Sir, I am really sorry, but I thought it was better to meet you. You are aware I am working on your

daughter-in-law's case. We are perturbed as we have not made much headway with the interrogations. As usual, the initial premise was to begin with the groom's family. In such cases, that's generally what we do," said the Inspector.

“I am completely aware of the goings-on in your department. I feel sorry for the people of our state. Our justice delivery system is crumbling. It has become very difficult to get justice in our cities today. There needs to be a complete overhaul of not only the way we do policing but also the criminal justice system. It should include a complete shift in mentalities of not only the police but also of the advocates and the judges. Cases need to be dealt with quickly. Justice delayed is justice denied you see!” said Ravi.

“Sir, I sincerely appreciate your views. You are doing a lot of good work in Gaya. I have heard rave reviews about all that you have done. What surprises me is that despite such a rot in our services, people with good intent are still able to deliver to the masses. Does it not show a thing or two about the India of our dreams? We can still achieve our goals. It is important to have people who think and deliver like you. Our country could be better,” said the Inspector. “The other thing I would like to tell you, sir, is that we are giving this our best shot. We will use all our skills and ingenuity to catch the culprit. This will not be one of the run-of- the-mill cases for sure.” The Inspector ended with a cough.

“I’ll be happy if you can get to the bottom of this case. She was a darling of the entire family, me included. We had so many hopes from the marriage. She would have given us an offspring and helped our future. We were overjoyed a month ago and were all so welcoming. But see how things have changed in a matter of days! She has left us devastated. None of us can get over this tragedy. I am unable to speak to Amitabh and Ajit. They have seen the worst already. I am sure you don’t have anything to implicate them yet and you will not get any wiser any time soon.” Ravi’s sorrow brought on a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Sir, I understand your warmth for your daughter-in- law and your state of mind at this loss. Please accept my deepest condolences for the same. May she rest in peace.” The Inspector paused for those words to sink in and then continued, “Therefore, I wish to get to the bottom of this case. I need to view it from all possible angles. I am sure you will help me with your side of the story.”

My side of the story? What do you mean, Inspector?"

"Sir don't take it otherwise, please. I am just doing my duty. For us, till the investigation is over, everyone connected to the case is guilty till proved otherwise."

"I agree and I will help you with your interrogation. Not today, but any time you ask, if it helps us get to the bottom of it. You have my attention. Shoot!" Ravi's demeanor was at its professional best.

"Sir let me come straight away to the point. Why did you call Khushbu twice to your place to meet someone high up? Who was this 'high up' person who met Khushbu and what was the reason behind the meetings? As much as I know, Khushbu was not from the services and was just a homemaker. How could she relate to your professional or personal world? You did not know her prior to her marriage, did you?" said the Inspector was at his inquisitive best.

Tring, tring! The house phone rang loudly. In came the *ardali*, running. He took the receiver, spoke softly into it, turned to Ravi and said, *"Babuji, aap ka phone hai. Bada Saheb hain line par.* (Sir, it's a call for you. Bada Saheb is at the other end.)*"*

Ravi ran to the phone with a start. Rajiv could not hear the miffed conversation, but he observed Ravi intently. He could see that the call unnerved him. But was it the telephonic conversation or his barrage of questions that had unnerved him? Rajiv could only guess. He hid his glee as he saw under the professional and tough demeanor of Ravi, a slightly diffident person. Someone who could be controlled despite his position in the government.

Ravi was now gasping for some breath. He was visibly shaken. He was perspiring. Rajiv rushed to him asking if he needed any help or should he call the ambulance. Ravi slowly regained his rhythm and his coherence. He asked Rajiv to just wait for a while. He went inside the bedroom. He returned in a jiffy with some medicines, had them, and again sat in front of Rajiv. All this happened in a matter of a couple of minutes. Ravi was looking brighter and better already. Rajiv tried to look at the tablet strip, but he could not read it from a distance.

Ravi observed Rajiv's eyes peering at the strip. He said, "Rajiv ji, *aapka andaaz hamein pasand aaya* (I appreciate your style). You are good in your job. I am sure you will be able to get to the bottom of the case. Don't you worry, I just took paracetamol. Sometimes, I get taken by this cold climate. It does not suit me too much. Also, I am not quite used to an interrogation, you see!" He laughed out loud.

Rajiv was slightly taken aback. He was surprised by what had happened in the last few minutes.

Ravi saw him fumbling for words and said, "Look, you can either delve into my problems or on your case. Your choice. I wish to cooperate, but I don't feel comfortable with your mannerism."

Rajiv got back his momentum and said, "Sir, I am sorry if my reactions to your sudden change in health and disposition has unnerved you. I thought your conversation with your superior was your undoing and not my questions. I might be incorrect in my assessment but…"

Rajiv was cut sharply by Ravi who averred, "Inspector, do your duty! Don't teach me how to speak to my boss or how to behave!"

Slightly harried now, Rajiv said, "Sir, that was not my intention. I want answers to my questions which have nothing to do with your professional world. Should I repeat my questions?"

Ravi reclined in his chair and resumed in a slightly low voice, "Khushbu was a well-read person. She was intelligent and well-meaning. I liked her and felt she was good to grow the family's fortunes. She could be the harbinger of change for the family for the better. I wanted her to interact with some higher-ups in the administration so that she could start an NGO for mass welfare. There are so many funds that the foreign institutions are willing to bring into the right projects in Bihar. There's only one issue. We have a host of NGOs that are not run professionally, and they are real suckers. They cheat the world bodies and, mind you, I am using mild words here. I wanted Khushbu to take up a good project for the tribals of either Patna or Gaya district.

She had the intellectual bent, was well-read, and had the passion to do some social work. I always knew that if I could introduce her to the

right set of people in this area, she could find her destiny." There was pin-drop silence for a while and then Ravi continued, "Inspector, I wanted her to meet my boss, who is a very senior IAS officer and who controls a lot of projects in this area. There are irrigation and other projects under his work domain which could completely change the face of the tilling Dalits. We could get them out of penury and give them the strength to get up and grow in a better society."

Rajiv interjected. "Sir, if you do not mind, I would like to know who your senior in the services is."

Pat came the reply. "Ghanshyam ji. He is Secretary Rank. A direct IAS! Ghanshyam ji is a very learned man and has done exemplary work in his domains in the past. He was known to have done a lot of good work in Madhya Pradesh. He has done significant work in the Department of Primary and Secondary Education. He has created model schools and churned out some very bright students from government schools. Look at our schools here! They are in such a mess! Ghanshyam ji was willing to use his domain expertise in either education or on irrigation. There's only as much one can do directly while being in the government. He, therefore, wanted some good NGOs who could work with him to transform our systems and processes to create a long-term behavioral change in his area of work." Ravi gulped down a glass of water.

Rajiv said, "So, you wanted Khushbu to help Ghanshyam ji with his project?"

Ravi was condescending in his reply, "Oh, where are your instincts, Inspector? Do I need to say that as well?"

Ill at ease, Rajiv concurred, "Okay, so I now understand why you called Khushbu to meet some higher-ups. I am given to understand that there were two meetings that she came for. Were you present at those meetings? Were both these meetings with Ghanshyam ji or were there some other important people as well? Were there people from the IMF or the World Bank?"

He was cut short by Ravi, who shook his hand and head in unison and said, "Lo and behold! I am up against an Inspector who is good and knowledgeable. I am happy to interact with you, Inspector!"

Rajiv knew these were delaying tactics. He was now hiding something. He was thinking on the fly to come up with some satisfactory answers. Rajiv did some gesture and face-reading. He was good at that as well. He was a trained specialist and was one of the few good detectives in the department. He did not want to give the luxury of time as an advantage to Ravi. He wanted quick answers.

Seeing Rajiv slightly uneasy, Ravi rang the bell. This was possibly to get the oft-spotted running *ardali*. Ravi ordered some whisky for himself and some soft lime soda for the Inspector. Rajiv was on duty and thought it unwise and unprofessional to have drinks.

Rajiv was fidgety and wanted his answers immediately. Ravi was surely using delaying tactics. He was a senior officer in the services and Rajiv was fully aware of his powers. Rajiv wanted to be soft with Ravi but at the same time he sensed an opportunity. He could see the case getting wide open. He had to wade through those waters to be able to reconstruct the events. It was already a good day's work. He had to leave for Patna. He wanted to do so immediately.

Ravi was in no mood to let go either. He wanted to understand Rajiv thoroughly. He wanted to make Rajiv bare in front of his sharp peering eyes. He was now the predator while Rajiv was his unlikely prey.

Rajiv did not enjoy this role reversal. He looked once again at Ravi and said, "Sir, I have to leave for Patna now. Could you just answer some of my questions? That would be really nice of you."

Ravi responded in the negative. He said that he was exhausted and that he wanted some rest and would continue the session the next morning. He suggested that Rajiv could stay at his guest for the night and enjoy a sumptuous dinner, one that he had already asked his *ardali* to prepare.

Rajiv did not want to go through all that. He had a lot of work to do. He politely took his leave, saying he would be back the next morning. He wanted to go back to Patna. He would rush back to Gaya in the morning.

Rajiv was now thinking. The only person he could disclose all this to was Amrita. She was the only interested person who was fully aware of

the case in its minutest details. She used to get a daily briefing. Even Rajiv's bosses were not so aware. Amrita was in Patna. Rajiv was dying to get under the quilt with her. Those were some of the life's pleasures he could do with. He was not on a guilt trip anyway as he had chosen not to marry. There was a good demand for him at the Bihar dowry market. However, for now, he was enjoying the pleasures of his bachelorhood, and how!

PATNA

7 January 2015

He was quite late to bed on a cold evening. He just wanted to doze off after a heart-warming session with his partner in bed. Amrita was all excited to hear the new angle to the developing story. You could not mess with Amrita! Even the Inspector was aware of her soft power. He had narrated his entire experience with Ravi a while ago. Amrita had intently heard it. She knew that some further details would emerge soon. The investigation was now possibly on the right track. She admonished Rajiv for not having spoken to Ravi earlier. He was, after all, a very close family member.

She also wanted Rajiv to speak to Mrs. Jha, the old neighbor of Ajit's family, who had expressed a lot of displeasure at Khushbu's death. Rajiv made a mental note of the same. He knew that Amrita was a smart girl and was exercising her mental faculties well.

Rajiv was now in haste and started cuddling Amrita. She wanted a little more time, though. She wanted Rajiv to be better prepared for his upcoming interview with Ravi. She was aware that if Ravi or his seniors were even slightly involved by any chance, Rajiv had to be very tactful to extract the truth from them. He had to be able to read between lines. They were powerful people. They could exercise immense power and completely derail the investigation. Rajiv could be transferred much before he reached any sort of logical conclusion.

Rajiv started making love. She resisted but soon gave in. Rajiv was a well-built guy. She loved men who had a good physique. He was younger to her by a couple of years. She liked his stamina in bed. The two enjoyed being close to each other. Rajiv dozed off soon after. But Amrita could not. She was still thinking. She was unable to really understand what had gone wrong in two meetings. If what Ravi had said was correct, there was no reason that could have led Khushbu to take her life. There was obviously something more to it. It might have

started with the NGO, though. Could have gone worse. Might have been a rape by the higher-ups or something more sinister.

Was Ravi really involved in all of it? Was he aware that it could take such a bad turn? In that case, would he, in the first place, introduce Khushbu to the higher-ups? He was obviously the *Bade Chachu* to her as well. He would not have done any such thing knowingly. Or was he taking his pound of flesh for keeping Ajit's family afloat during their bad times? How bad could it be? Why did Khushbu not speak to Amrita and confess to her the miseries of her life? Why did she take the extreme step? Was she coerced into that as well? What could have happened?

She got up with a start and did not find Rajiv in bed. He probably had gone out already. She could not find him at home. However, there was a message that read:

Going to meet Ravi. If something happens to me, go to the police and report that Ravi is responsible for it. He would be complicit in the murder of Khushbu and mine if that happens. If all goes well, I will meet you for dinner at the Ashoka at 9 p.m. See you, cheers!

GAYA

8 January 2015

Tring, tring, tring!

Ravi picked up the cradle. Ghanshyam was on the other side. They chatted for a while, and it ended with Ravi looking exhausted. It was just 9 a.m., but the morning indicates the rest of the day! Ravi expected that the day would bring a lot of tension and unease. It completely depended on the Inspector.

Ravi had foraged some information on Rajiv. He had found out that that he was a genuinely honest inspector and was not someone who could be easily taken off one's back. He pursued his cases as a detective with keen interest. He was not reluctant to take on politicians or senior officials in the government. He was charismatic and had a fan following among the masses in his jurisdiction.

In this case, even Rajiv's department seniors were surprised as to why he was putting in extreme efforts despite failing every single time. They wanted him to write off the case as one that did not have any conclusive answers. However, Rajiv was adamant that he wanted to get to the bottom of the story. He did not relent. The effort that he had put into the case was now telling on his face. His eyes had begun to droop, and it was keeping him up late at nights.

The doorbell rang. The *ardali* ran to open the main door. He ushered Rajiv into the drawing room. Ravi called Rajiv to the dining table. He was having his breakfast. He asked the *ardali* to bring a plate for Rajiv as well. Rajiv did not want breakfast with Ravi, but he was quite hungry. Ravi asked him to have something so that they could have the discussion on the table itself. Rajiv relented and served himself a couple of chapatis, curd, sabzi and a couple of boiled eggs.

"Sir, can we start where we left off yesterday?" asked Rajiv.

"Yes, we can talk. I am surprised inspectors in Bihar are so committed to solving cases. You are dot on time. Also, you must have travelled

back to Patna yesterday late night and are back in Gaya today early morning, pre-office time! That's incredible, Inspector," Ravi exclaimed.

"Sir, people like you inspire us. I've heard so many good things about you from so many people. You have a genuine fan following in your area. That simply means you are doing good work for the farmers in your area. I feel sad to meet you for this case such as it is. It would have been wonderful to know you as a person. I am sure we will remain friends after I have filed the closure to this case," Rajiv said.

"Insha'Allah!" Ravi was quick to say. "I have said time and again that Khushbu was dear to all of us in the family. In fact, I am also shocked as to why she committed suicide."

Rajiv interjected, "Sir, you are saying that she has committed suicide. The police theory so far is that it could have been a case of an abetment of suicide or even murder."

Ravi looked calm in his demeanor, but he was hiding his internal adrenaline rush. He was quick to rebut, "Inspector Saheb, it is only a theory till now, right? I do not agree. She may have been depressed for some reason not known to any of us and may have, in a fit of rage or depression, committed suicide. I am sure there's no other angle to it."

Rajiv could not contain his emotions and just fired, "Sir, I don't understand this! I have just one simple question for you. Were you present at the two meetings that you called Khushbu to? Who all were present other than Ghanshyam ji? I have not finished my research yet and I do not want to get carried away by opinions. I have another question for you—why do you think she was depressed? Or angry for that matter? She was just married, and I understand, from all accounts I have so far, from credible people who attended the marriage, that she was excited about the whole thing and had genuinely started liking Ajit. So, I would now request you to simply answer my questions. Please cooperate."

Ravi retorted, "What if I do not answer? I don't like the way you ask questions. You are talking to a senior IAS officer in the Government of

Bihar and I am many grades your senior in the hierarchy. Are you trying to interrogate me?"

"Sir, it is just my inquisitiveness. Sorry if I spoke in an inappropriate manner. I deeply apologize for my behavior. However, I sincerely hope you will let me know the truth about the two meetings," Rajiv said.

"Rajiv, I want to help you as it would help my *swargiya* (departed) daughter-in-law's cause and my nephew, Ajit. They are dear to me and I am their closest family. Do not take me wrong here. Don't put me behind the bars in your mind, while you speak to me. That changes your behavior towards me, and I do not like that. Listen to the facts first. Link it up as all detectives do later, maybe. Come back to me if you still have unanswered questions or any clarifications. Let me, however, tell you all that I am aware of myself," Ravi said and gulped down the water on the table in front of him.

The table was made of teakwood and it was intricately carved. It was freshly varnished. It had the smell of the paint. It had an edge that looked slightly broken, but one could not be sure. The chairs were not freshly varnished. It looked slightly odd. The tabletop was also varnished and did not have a glass top. Teakwood could be seen in all its beauty. Its light color and the palette were beautiful and mesmerizing in a charming old-world kind of way. While Rajiv was in these thoughts, Ravi rang the bell. The *ardali* appeared in all his humbleness.

"Sahib ke liye ek glass whisky banao. Thoda sa ice dalna. Unko neat dena. Paani ya soda mat dalna, (Serve some

whiskey to our guest. Put some ice. Give it to him neat, without water or soda.)*"* Ravi said.

Rajiv immediately interrupted, "Sir, I am on duty. I do not drink while on duty. I could spend time with you one of the evenings, once I've filed a closure report on this case. Till then, please excuse me."

Ravi was amused and told the *ardali* to get two lemonades. Now, Rajiv turned his full attention towards the *Sahib*—Ravi. He thought and almost quipped, 'Let truths be told!'

“So, let me tell you, Rajiv, the facts of the case. As I told you earlier, I wanted to help Khushbu create her career and find her mojo. She was a great kid. She was very respecting of me, just like Ajit, and was forthcoming. She was upfront and honest. If she kept quiet, it would be only to avoid ruffling feathers. She knew too well that I was like her Bade Chachu and would keep her interests in mind in whatever I recommended to her. In fact, the first time I spoke to her about the NGO proposition was when she came to Patna after her marriage. She was quite excited to understand the entire matter and responded accordingly.” Ravi had a fair bit of compassion in his voice and genuine love and respect for the departed soul.

Rajiv was now listening with rapt attention. He wanted to hear all that Bade Chachu aka Ravi was to disclose.

“I got fond of my daughter-in-law too soon and God does not allow you to be happier than you should be.

Isn’t it true, *Babu moshai*? Hey, I know you are not a Bengali, but you must remember our history. Bihar was part of the erstwhile Bengal—East Bengal and West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar, were all together earlier. Anyway, let me tell you all about the meetings. May I declare—I will speak the truth and nothing but the truth!” Ravi was in his mood, jovial and at his showman best.

But Rajiv was getting impatient. He did not like the time that Ravi was taking to simply tell the truth. He might have been manufacturing the entire episode in his own little way and it might put the entire investigation on the backburner for a while. The half- truths that might be inserted could make Rajiv’s life difficult. He would have to sift through all the information to get to the bottom of the case. The meeting was not going well for Rajiv. He was getting a sense that he was being derailed.

Ravi was quite smart to punctuate Rajiv’s thoughts with his sudden argument, saying, “Rajiv, you seem to be somewhere else. What happened to your probing eyes and deep concentration? I am in the mood to share the events of the two encounters between Khushbu and my boss, while you are in the thoughts of your own. This is blasphemy!”

Rajiv was just a little taken aback by the sudden accusation, but he was thinking on his feet now and he worked rather well under pressure. He had an enigmatic personality. He was good at the theory of deduction and had a keen sense of observation. He

could feel an adrenaline rush within him and could sense a way to throw the opponent on the mat and finally pin him down. That would require a better understanding of Ravi's character. He was also thinking of the warmth that Amrita provided to his bed and that it was now his utmost duty to uncover the truths behind the ugly turn of events that had taken the life of a just-married girl.

It is sometimes difficult to say which events in one's life are more important than others and why someone needs to perform. These are sometimes based on purely professional reasons while sometimes they could be due to extraneous reasons. However, it all boils down to one thing:

"*Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you're right.*"

- Henry Ford, 1863–1947

Rajiv addressed Ravi instantly, "Sir, please do not read too much into my behavior and emotions. I am just a student asking my teacher to throw some light on the events that transpired on the two days when Khushbu came to meet you and your boss. That would solve my dilemma and help me close the case quickly."

Ravi knew there was no escaping the question and that Rajiv would have to be thrown crumbs or else he wouldn't go away. He said, "Rajiv, I do not have anything to hide. My life is an open book and people have access to every part of it. I am a public servant and take pride in my work. I do think I have a good

boss and that he does a lot of social work. You know, the biggest joy of my job is that just by doing my job with honesty and integrity, I can make a difference to the lives of hundreds of people. I do not have to do any exemplary work. I just do my job. It works out in the interest of a decent population size in my area of influence and I am genuinely able to contribute to better living standards for the folks.

“Getting back to the events of the two days, let me tell them to you sequentially.

“On December the 5th, 2014, Khushbu came to meet Ghanshyam ji at around 11 a.m. at our guesthouse in Patna. Ghanshyam ji was supposed to come over at around 11 a.m. but he was delayed. He is such a senior officer. He has so much work to do. So, it is normal to be late, you know, by about 30 odd minutes. It is quite okay as per Indian National Time!”

Ravi drank some water, having set the stage for the story. Rajiv was anticipating a dramatic version of the events and Ravi was leaving nothing to chance. He looked like a megalomaniac in all his glory expounding on his version of the story in graphic detail with a minute-by-minute turn of events, fit to give any creative movie writer a run for his money. Don’t they say it is difficult to find talented storytellers these days? Well, one must scour the length and breadth of India in the most unsuspecting places. The country has given birth to amazing storytellers at different points in time who have never been published for want of access to the prevailing publishing mediums. The grannies of yore have all been ever such enchanting storytellers. Endless short stories have been written based on grandma’s stories. Grannies have created children of character and substance with their vivid and exemplary storytelling. Their stories always projected the triumph of Good over Evil; Good has always won over Evil in the war of the heavens. Ram and Ravana, Krishna and Kansa have all been there for ages and grannies have narrated their own versions to tweak the message to be suitable to their children. It has been an age-old tradition to tuck the child in bed and wish them sweet dreams with a fable.

“Yes, sir. We could say it is interred in our bones as Indians, isn’t it? We would always be slightly late and feel no regret about it. It is our way of keeping on time!” Rajiv exclaimed.

“So, let me narrate the story. Not a fabricated one but the true facts. Simple, coherent, and concise. Ghanshyam ji came at around 11.30 and sat in front of us on the sofa. We were sitting on a bigger sofa. Khushbu got up and touched his feet as per our Indian tradition of giving the highest respect to elders. That made him happy and he

blessed her for a successful career ahead and a bountiful family life. He asked her about her studies and her vision in life and was quite impressed. He knew that she was a well-bred girl with high integrity. She also had a glint in her eyes that showed her determination to excel and to do something constructive with her life. She looked a homely girl who was affectionate and could keep her family together. She also looked pristine in her pink salwar kameez. She looked pure and ethereal. I felt so proud of her. She would take my family places; I was so sure of that.

"Ghanshyam ji told her about the need to form an NGO. He also said that his people would take care of the documentation and other regulatory requirements. She needed to just step up and manage it in times to come. That she would eke out some time from her household chores and do some honest work to bring the poor and the downtrodden out of their misery was a foregone conclusion. Ghanshyam ji saw in her a future messiah who could help the teeming poor evolve. She could work for their education and social upliftment. A lot was anyway happening for social upliftment of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes, but a lot was still to be done. While Ghanshyam ji and my work would help the farmers get better revenues for their produce and generate better produce from their small land parcels, Khushbu could take care of their children and their womenfolk. Her work would give them dignity and a future.

"Khushbu looked excited at the prospect of being able to help so many people by her hard work. She was sure that her Bade Chachu and his superior in the services would get her the wherewithal to be able to do all of it.

"Rajiv, I was also quite happy during that interaction which lasted for about 45 minutes. Ghanshyam ji looked satisfied as well. He sure as hell thought he had found an educated girl who wished to make a difference in her sphere of influence and who was incorruptible.

After 45 odd minutes, she left while we continued to talk about our work and our future business. I tried to apprise him of the need to get a few more international funding agencies to help us with our projects. He was happy to help. He further said that he was happy to meet

Khushbu and that our bigger NGO project would now be kick-started. He wished to go live on the project by the 15th of April.

"So, our plans were chalked out and he told me to wait for his call on the progress of documentation for the formation of the NGO. Khushbu would have to meet up once more. This time, however, he wanted to meet her at Gaya, the place where I've done my life's work. He wanted to show her all the work that could be done if the powers that be were diligent in their work. I am not extolling my virtues here, Rajiv, just saying what Ghanshyam ji said," concluded Ravi.

Rajiv said, "Sir, you are a humble soul and a gem of a person. I've already told you how I feel about the work that you are doing in this area. Let's be honest about it for once. I, for one, haven't seen another IAS officer working with such a keen sense of devotion for the development of his area of influence. All we get to meet, and we do meet a lot of them quite often, are corrupt and bigoted officers who are like termites eating up the very foundation of our nation."

Ravi was happy at this and he said, "Let's have some lunch, shall we? Got some mutton curry prepared for

us with rotis dipped in desi ghee. You could have a helping of rice as well. Have asked the *ardali* to prepare a bed for you. You could have your afternoon siesta and then we could finish our talk over the evening tea. Does that work for you?"

Rajiv was okay with the day as it was panning out. He had time on his hands, and he wished to take it slowly for now. He was building a good rapport with Ravi and he wished to bond over lunch. The *ardali* was already setting up the dining table for lunch. The dining table was also of solid wood, teak to be precise. It was not freshly varnished. It looked slightly old and in need of a fresh coat of polish. Rajiv wanted to know about the varnish on the centre table at the living room, but he did not want to ask. By now, he was aware that somehow Khushbu had kept the entire information of the NGO and the meetings from her core family. They were simply not aware of any of these events that unfolded in quick succession after her marriage. They were also the least suspecting of any wrongdoing by *Bade Bhaiya*.

“Rajiv had a wholesome lunch and a light conversation over the economy and the polity of the nation and of Bihar. He dozed off to sleep soon after lunch. He needed the sleep badly. He wanted to listen to the conversation in the evening with rapt attention. Well, gluttony and sleep have a deep connection. For a Bihari, it can’t get any better than having mutton and rice for lunch. It overjoys with its aroma, its taste, and its aftereffect of inducing sleep. It must have something to do with the release of hormones, I am told.

MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN

27 November 2014

Khushbu decided against going to the salon for getting dressed up for her wedding. She had complete confidence that she would be able to do it herself at home with some help from her mother and Amrita. But she was also feeling slightly weak and giddy. She was better prepared now than during the engagement to take care of the events that unfold in one's life post the wedding. She knew that her in-laws were a great couple and that they would love her like their own. Ajit was already in love and that she was quite aware of and elated about. She did not have much of a choice in any case. She had to make the marriage work and she was quite hopeful that she would excel in it.

She was also hopeful that her parents would support her fully and help her come to terms with the fact that she would now leave them and go to create her new home at her in-law's place. She would make it her own with their huge showering of love and affection. She would take great care of her in-laws and be a good daughter to them. She also had a lot of hopes from Ajit and her future with him. She wanted Ajit to achieve great heights in his career and she wanted to be the cynosure of his eyes for times to come. She would also sometimes wonder whether she would be a homemaker or life had some career in store for her as well. She wanted to contribute to the family's kitty and grow the nest together with Ajit.

With a lot of dreams in her eyes, after lunch, she proceeded to get dressed for the evening. Amrita went with her to her room. Both girls planned to get dressed together. They wanted to take it easy and enjoy the entire evening and the time that they still had together. It was their me-time and they did not want others to intrude.

The house was teeming with people who had come for lunch. They were the *sharaatis*, the folks who were friends and family members of either Khushbu or her parents. The four professors were also there for lunch and

they had taken places of pride in the outside lawn. They sat there and discussed the vicissitudes of nature. For a November afternoon, it was quite a hot one with temperatures in the range of 18 to 29 degrees. Ranchi was the erstwhile summer capital of Bihar and was quite a cold place during the winter season, but this winter was different. The professors were talking about global warming and how we were contributing to the same by our various actions. The discussion was quite heated, and many other people had joined in. Some youngsters were also contributing with their knowledge of the environment. Google has made people knowledgeable in many subjects nowadays, and a click of the mouse can make one ready for impassioned speeches. Internet connectivity speeds were not great, but it was fast catching up, what with 3G shifting gears to 4G across the country. It remained to be seen whether the technology worked or took a greater toll on the companies that brought about a change after buying the spectrum at unforeseen prices.

It was a simple lunch with puri, sabzi, mutton, rice, dal, salad and papad with helpings of tilori and achar. People enquired whether there would be litti dipped in desi ghee or not. The answer was in the affirmative. The crowd looked forward to litti chokha apart from the kebabs and the other stuff.

The *baraatis* were dancing outside the venue by 8 p.m. They were all decked up in their best dresses. Firecrackers could be heard inside. Khushbu also went to the window to check out whether Ajit was dancing or not. There he was in all his glory in his white dress. He was the cynosure of all eyes. The *sharaatis* looked at Ajit. He was looking smart and was in a zone of his own. He had a style not seen in this part of Bihar and he carried himself well. The dancing went on in phases with friends and separately with family. It was all a great *tamasha* (celebration). Indians love their grand weddings. A lot of money is spent for this one evening which people want to be their best evening. For the marrying couple, this is their chance to be the heroes of the day. They are truly the heroes of the day.

Khushbu walked in with her brothers for the *Jaimal* (garland ceremony). She looked resplendent in her lehenga choli. She did not wear a lot of gold jewellery. She had her own distinctive style and the world be damned! She wore a jadau gold jewellery. It was a beautiful neck piece with seven

colored gemstones studded in antique gold. The ear danglers were of the same material and were to die for. Amrita closely followed Khushbu. Her parents were around, taking care of their guests. After the *Jaimal*, they had to take *aagya* (permission) from Ajit's parents for the wedding ceremony.

Jaimal has become an event over the years as weddings go well into the night and to the early morning. Most guests leave the venue after *Jaimal* and dinner. So, the *Jaimal* is a well-coordinated event. It is taken care of by the event managers. They make a big show around it for people to remember. It is a gorgeous show of display of character, beauty, tenderness, might, and many emotions bundled into one package. It is akin to exchanging rings; instead of rings, this involves garlanding your better half, accepting your spouse-to- be and officially announcing that the two of you wish to tie the nuptial knot tonight. It used to be a beauty to watch for both the *sharaatis* and the *baraatis.* But over time, it has changed somewhat into a dogfight as to who can go as high up in the air, supported by friends and brothers who are better built, to easily garland your spouse-to-be.

It has brought in some toxicity into the event and it is not a beauty to watch anymore. It might be the author's prejudice speaking but the euphoria around the setup has become unworthy of the soft event. It is hard balling while soft power used to be exercised earlier. Wasn't it better the old way, was it?

Jaimal went through with minimal fuss with cameras of all sorts clicking pictures and capturing videos of the unfolding event. People expect memories could be captured for long while forgetting to live it in the moment. The band of camera-toting agents and the new band of phone camera enthusiasts of all kinds make it difficult for the elderly and others to join in the excitement. The innumerable chairs captured by the crowd wishing to soak in the evening while the *tamasha* happens, are the ones to feel happy with whatever little kebabs they could put their fingers on while the stewards move around mostly in one selected area of the crowd. Do they literally ignore an area of the crowd completely or do they not get a chance to reach there? This thought has always foxed innumerable guests at weddings.

Ajit and Khushbu were looking their best and in complete control. They were happy being together and took in all the magic happening around them in their stride. They were comfortable together and that was all that mattered. Khushbu was not very careful about her looks or her *chunni* being in a particular position. She couldn't care less. She was the showstopper of the evening and she knew she rocked the look. She was also overjoyed to see Ajit in his *bandgala* suit. He looked like a *saheb* of yore. He was suave and gentlemanly. He was also manly. She knew him better now.

Amrita was happy connecting with people around her. She was always near Khushbu. Vivek was close by. Always a call away. He was half expecting a great night for himself as well with Amrita in her best mood for fun. He was just loving it!

The crowds started dispersing for dinner. The pandit wanted the bride and the groom to have a quick dinner and then join him at the mandap. Khushbu, Ajit and all the friends had a quick dinner. The wedding went late into the night. Most of the guests disappeared after their dinner. Only the closest relatives stayed back for the wedding. It ended at around 3 a.m. By 5 a.m., Khushbu had to be sent to the groom's house. The process got over on time. Khushbu left her parents and joined her new family. She would be the Laxmi of the family. Raja and Alka were overwhelmed with joy and grief in this hour. They knew their little daughter was now a grownup and had her own destiny. They wished her well. It was a poignant reminder of the Indian marriage system followed over generations since time immemorial. A daughter goes to her husband's home leaving her parents, thereby creating her new home; away from her own. It was like a bird going out to build her own nest.

GAYA: CONTINUED

8 January 2015

It was a cold and dry evening in Gaya. Rajiv walked into the drawing room around 5 p.m. He had a good nap. The drawing room was warm. He could see that the blower was silently working in the background with negligible noise. It was working just fine to keep it comfortable and cozy. He felt an urge to get to the bottom of the mystery. His innate sense of purpose put an urgency in his desire to uncover the truth. Like a true detective, he could smell the unwrapping of the layers in front of him. Ravi had still not walked in. The ardali walked in with samosa and a teapot with two cups. He could see the tea brewing nicely. He could pick up the aroma of Darjeeling tea.

Ravi walked around in his kurta-pyjamas. He was relaxed in his attire. Rajiv had still not met the lady of the house. He was eager to know whether Ravi stayed alone or had a wife hidden. Rajiv was quick to mention, "Ravi ji, thanks for taking care of me so well. Had a sumptuous lunch this afternoon and a good nap. The sleep deprivation was getting to me, I guess. Now I feel better! Relaxed and cozy. You have a good blower, I see."

Ravi smiled and said, half suspecting that Rajiv would be wanting to know a little more about his family, "My wife, Sheila, has a fetish for good little items. You do not get many good electronics here in Gaya. She makes it a point to buy certain items whenever we visit Patna, Ranchi, or other places. She doesn't travel much nowadays, though. She has not been keeping well. She's been ailing for over a couple of years. She has a rare skin disease that keeps her away from all of us, kind of quarantined in her own home. I am not allowed to go near her. Our children also sometimes come to see her from a distance. She may never recover fully. Have shown her to the best doctors at AIIMS and Vellore. They have all given a basic maintenance dose and asked us to keep her quarantined as it could be

infectious. She shouldn't get too much of the sun's rays. It is harmful for her and her condition deteriorates.

Oh, sorry, Rajiv! Why did I pick up this topic? I have no clue! I just felt relaxed in your company and felt like blurting out my frustrations. I am sorry, man!"

Rajiv was quick to interject, "Sir, I am so sorry to hear this. God has his own way of punishing us. Or even saving us. It is only that we do not understand his message so often. It pains us no end. There may be a greater purpose. Sheila ma'am may very well recover, for all we know. She needs to have the courage to fight. I am sure you will get her out of this mess. You are such a do-gooder yourself. Blessings of hundreds of farmers are with you!"

Ravi was contemplative but quickly added, "Well, I do question the Lord often. I am sure your kind words will do a lot of good to my family. Let's now have some tea. It seems to have brewed perfectly by now. The samosas have gone cold, I guess, due to our chatting up. We must get a fresh new batch." Saying that, Ravi rang the bell for the *ardali*.

"Khushbu was happy after the first meeting," Ravi said. "She called me twice later asking the progress with the paperwork. She wished to launch her NGO quickly and call her parents and in-laws for the function. She was overjoyed and had obviously kept the news from her family to share the surprise with them at the right time. A positive person with a sense of purpose! She wanted to do a lot of socially relevant work. For the needy. For the kids from the lower section of the society. You rightly said, God has a way of doling out kindness and punishment. Only that we do not understand why he took her away so soon, not allowing her to create her magic. She should have been allowed to do what she set out to. She was a thinking person; creative and vulnerable."

Rajiv hurriedly quipped, "Vulnerable?"

"Yes, vulnerable, I guess," said Ravi almost instantly. 'She was a good kid but vulnerable. She wanted to please everyone. She wanted to please people with her good manners, her purpose, her love for her family and her friends. She made some very good friends over time. I remember one name, though. Amrita. She was her best buddy."

Rajiv froze on hearing the name of his partner-in-bed over the last few days. He knew how close Amrita was to Khushbu. He knew that he was pursuing the Khushbu suicide or murder case with a vengeance because of his good time with Amrita. He was a little anxious now. He wanted to know how much Ravi knew about Amrita. Rajiv asked, “Can you throw a little more light on Amrita? Did you have a chance to meet her? Did she know you? Did Khushbu tell you about Amrita? How is she connected to the case? Does she stay at Patna or at Ranchi by any chance? Can I meet her and seek her feedback as well on the case?”

Ravi was smiling by now. Rajiv was nonplussed, but he knew he had shown a rare fissure deep within himself. He had burst out without rhyme or reason. He should have allowed Ravi to simply go on. The interruption and his outburst were not good for him.

Ravi cut into Rajiv’s chain of thoughts with, “Rajiv ji, what’s with Amrita? She is just a girl who used to be a good friend of Khushbu. I got to know only because Khushbu told me about her. That Amrita was her best friend. She stays at Mumbai and was a corporate czar. Working her way up to the top at her age was no mean feat. She must be a tiger under her skin, I guess!”

Rajiv totally agreed with the description of Amrita. She was a mean machine and she would always achieve what she set out to. She would go alone to conquer a fortress and share the spoils with her enemy-turned-friends. He had never been amazed at her strength but was elated to have found her. He was having a dream affair with Amrita, but she was a hard taskmaster and he was only too happy to give in to her wishes. He could see Ravi pouring into his thoughts, trying to read him more than what Rajiv should have done by now. Rajiv knew he had to recover soon, or else Ravi would dust him for good.

Rajiv got back up on his feet and made an excuse to go to the powder room. He washed his face a couple of times over, gently splashing his eyes with water. It was chill and it went to his bones. He felt cold suddenly. He wiped his face and walked back into the drawing room. Sitting in front of Ravi, he asked, “What’s the story of this centre table, sir?” Rajiv looked Ravi in the eye expecting some answer.

Ravi said, almost with a start, “I do not understand your question. Are you interested in where or when I bought it or is there something else you wish to know?” Rajiv knew he was going a bit faster than he should have. He should have just allowed Ravi to continue with his story.

Ravi was only too happy to get back to the story. So, he said, “Well, so the second meeting was soon organized by me at Gaya. I sent a car to pick Khushbu up.

It was, if I remember correctly, December the 11th.

KHUSHBU IN GAYA

11 December 2014

"It was a very cold morning. Khushbu arrived early at around 11 a.m. with some sweets. She had also brought a helping of homecooked chicken curry for us. I was surprised and asked her whether she had told the family about her visit to my place. She said she had just told them she was going to meet her friend who stays in the city and that they had planned a day trip around the city.

"She was happy to see my place and she went around the entire house. She was sad to see Sheila in her condition and said that she would pray for her speedy recovery. She wanted to go and meet her, but we did not allow her inside the quarantined area. She spent quite some time looking at her aunt. She genuinely felt the pain that Sheila was going through, and I always knew she would help by her prayers.

"We were waiting for the *Bada Saheb*. We got chatting. She told me about her past. About her parents. About Ranchi, the city she had grown up in. About her school friends and about Amrita," Ravi said with a smirk on his face. Rajiv was silent this time around and hid his emotions well. Ravi continued, "She said Amrita was her bestie and that they had met during their college days at Pune. Amrita was in Psychology Hons. while Khushbu was in Economics Hons. They happened to meet one afternoon during a college fete and got talking. They got along like a house on fire and their interactions grew over time, and they became best friends forever. I am rather surprised, Rajiv ji, as to why Amrita never came knocking to Ajit's house after Khushbu's death. I thought, even though Amrita was a career-girl focusing on her career, she would have visited the house to offer her condolences. To possibly look at her friend's room to figure out what went wrong. To possibly speak to Ajit's parents and to Khushbu's parents."

Rajiv countered suddenly, "Sir, how are you so sure that Amrita did not meet any of them? She may have met her parents or Ajit's friends or

someone else. Ajit or Ajit's parents are yet in the angle of suspicion, so she might have avoided them."

Ravi retorted sharply, "I agree. She may have been in touch with Khushbu's parents. Anyway, nowadays kids are career-oriented unlike our time. We could have given a lot of time for our friends and family members. We were always present when needed. India has lost its old-world charm. Kids have become more like robots. They are in their own world, centered on the internet. You see, I still don't use a smartphone. I like my old house phone on the cradle, and I have this small Nokia color-screen mobile that keeps me company. It is good as it doesn't distract me from my work. I am very much connected to the people around me. Kids are connected to the world, Rajiv ji, but not with their own people. You can easily see four kids playing together, having coffee, all of them on their mobiles posting photos or doing stuff. They even play online nowadays. Remember our days when we used to play contact sports? These kids do not know anything about kabaddi or pitto, you know!"

Ravi was exhausted from all the talking, but Rajiv was happy to let him talk. However, now his patience was dwindling. He wanted to see what turn the story took. Ravi understood what was going on in Rajiv's mind and said, "I understand Rajiv ji, you need to know what happened next. So, let me tell you that *Bada Saheb* was late that afternoon. He managed to come around 1
p.m. and he was famished. We had lunch together. He was happy to eat home cooked food. He was fond of his non-veg food and he had plenty that day. During lunch, we had a conversation. *Bada Saheb* told us that the work was progressing well, and the NGO would be registered soon in Khushbu's name. He also told us that he was in touch with a couple of foreign financiers and he was getting a good response. He had already floated a CV of Khushbu, and it was working well in the department. Khushbu and I were surprised at the pace of development. Positively, I must say. She was very happy with the developments.

"Suddenly, Khushbu became indulgent and started asking *Bada Saheb* a few questions. She wanted to know his background and his major achievements in life apart from competing in the civil services exams. *Bada Saheb* told her about his work in the Primary and Secondary Education Department of the Government of Madhya Pradesh. He spoke

about his model school's concept. He shared with us how he changed some of the existing government schools into high- performance schools through right aid at the right time and through continuous interventions. Khushbu asked him a lot of questions to understand his interventions in schools and their results. It was a much-discussed topic that day and all of us learnt a lot from the conversation. From the master of schools himself! She also asked him about a school somewhere in Madhya Pradesh and whether he had ever been there. To that question, however, *Bada Saheb* did not respond. We had a lot of food and I felt sleepy. I asked *ardali* to prepare the bed for *Bada Saheb* in the guestroom. I took him to the room and asked him to take a nap.

"Khushbu got restive and she went back to Patna. She wanted to be back early, or else she would have been stuck in traffic. She left Gaya around 3 p.m. that day. My car went to drop her. After that, I also went to sleep. Had a great evening with *Bada Saheb* that day. We went out for a walk and then we went to fetch him to meet a few villagers in my area of work. He was happy to meet them and enquired about how we could improve their well-being. He met a few school children as well and then he left for Patna around 7 p.m. the same evening.

"After that, there were no interactions on the NGO subject with Ghanshyam ji because we heard about the shocking suicide of Khushbu. It came as a bolt from the blue. I remember Ghanshyam ji was visibly shaken at the news, which I gave to him in person. He could not believe it.

"Rajiv ji, this is the truth about our interactions with Khushbu. I am sure no one knew anything about any of these interactions. Still I have told you every bit of it in graphic detail. There was nothing there. Of course, we wanted to help. God has his own ways, you know!"

Rajiv knew that it was only one side of the story while the other side could be almost impossible to find. He was however happy that he had uncovered a lot of details of Khushbu's interactions with Ravi and Ghanshyam. He was surprised that Amrita had no inkling of the goings-on in Khushbu's life post her marriage. Was she in her own catfights at that time in her career that she had completely ignored her dear friend? He knew that wasn't true, but he wished to speak to Amrita as soon as he reached Patna. He said his goodbye and left. He was a man on a mission

and wanted to close his case quickly. Before that, however, he had one more person to reach out to: the agitated neighbor of Ajit.

PATNA

8 January 2015

Amrita was waiting for Rajiv anxiously. It was a breezy evening and quite foggy. Nothing could be seen outside the flat. She was worried.

Rajiv reached his flat at around 9 p.m. from Gaya. Amrita offered him some refreshments and tea. They sat down to discuss the day as it unfolded. Rajiv narrated the entire story to Amrita. She could feel Khushbu's desire to do something very good and socially relevant. She was clear that there was something more to the events as they unfolded. She, for sure, knew there was nothing that could have coerced Khushbu to take her own life. She knew there were half-truths and falsities abounding in *Bade Bhaiya's* statement. Something was amiss!

She wanted to get into action by meeting Khushbu's family and her parents. She also wanted to meet Ajit. She would have liked to meet *Bade Bhaiya* and Ghanshyam ji also. Rajiv thought otherwise. He calmed her down and told her that her entry into these conversations may not help yet. It might add some doubts in the minds of the perpetrators of the crime if it were a crime. Amrita agreed. She wanted Rajiv to go to the depths of the statement recorded so far and figure out if they were all consistent.

Rajiv told her that he still had to meet Ghanshyam, if he would give him some time, and the agitated neighboring auntie.

Amrita knew that no police officer would do as much as Rajiv was doing for her friend. She had to take care of him. Keep him well-fed. Keep him warm and happy. Keep him satisfied. She was there for her friend, quite unlike what *Bade Bhaiya* thought. She had always been there for Khushbu. She was worried as to why Khushbu had given her no hint of such an impending problem in her life. Nor had she

mentioned the NGO episode at all. Why had she kept it all from her best friend? Was there any other way Khushbu could have reached out to her? An email, a voice call, a video, or a letter? She thought she would do her own search tomorrow. Khushbu might have left some clue for her to decipher. She needed to go over her laptop and her files with a fine comb. She also needed to check out her flat in Mumbai for any letters.

Rajiv wanted to go to sleep, but she wanted to be with him. They made love, and then, being tired, Rajiv dozed off. Yet, Amrita stayed wide awake. She could not sleep. She started her laptop and began searching for any clues. There were many unseen mails from her office and certain personal messages. She decided to go through all those files and emails through the night. She did not want Rajiv to be disturbed, and so she left the room. She went into the study and sat down with her laptop and smartphone. She made herself a large cup of coffee. It would keep her up all night. The slow release of caffeine would work well with her task at hand.

There were a lot of mails from her office staff, friends, and foes alike. She also felt herself crumbling and creating a fissure deep within. Her continued absence from work had given Cockpit an open hand within the organization. He was gaining strength by her absence. She knew she was losing out in the race to the top. She hardly cared now. *Lest truth be told,* she thought. Life comes to a complete halt at times and it is better to fight one's way out than to get retired hurt or to get past it without really reaching its depth. That leaves one heartbroken and distressed.

She was 'once a fighter, always a fighter'. She had to get to the bottom of Khushbu's so-called suicide. She had to uncover the truth. What if she lost a year in the organization? She was in her prime and still had time to catch on. She could work with Cockpit if he were to become the Head of Marketing for her organization. She did not mind it. He was good, after all. He deserved it as well, for himself and his family. He deserved it for his clients and for the organization that he had also worked hard to build. He had a reputation. She, for sure, had kicked everyone to reach there. She could kick him out as well through her hard work and machinations. But she did not have time for it, for now.

She thought of calling Surana. He might have gone to bed already, but she did not care. She had not spoken to him in a while. He had called her a few times, but she did not take those calls.

Surana's phone rang in the middle of the night. He got up with a start. He took the call. Amrita asked him about the goings-on at the office. She wanted to know what the HR was thinking about her continued absence. She also asked him if there was any letter for her at the office. Surana wasn't aware of it. He promised to get back to her in a day. He would also go and check out her flat for any letters.

Surana told her, "Longing for you, Amrita. Haven't had the good fortune of seeing you in a while. I know you are quite disturbed by the sudden turn of events in Patna and that you are focused as a person. You will get to the bottom of it, I am sure. Are you planning to come over soon? Wish to meet you. It has been several days. HR representatives were also enquiring about you. I hope you've sent your application for the long absence. They understand what's going on with you. However, you must inform them about when you wish to join. I am sure you are aware of what's happening over here. You must be getting those victory mails from Cockpit, I hope!"

Amrita was disinterested in the conversation about office politics. She told Surana to be her loyal solider there and keep her informed. She also asked him to get back to her the next day at the earliest. She wanted to find the crutches to overcome the storm raging inside her, which was taking her down too. She wanted to stay afloat. She knew she had a chance to open the investigation further. She had to push it through the right channel. Therefore, she had to work through Rajiv. She had to work through the system to get to the bottom of the case. It was all too personal for her. She did not wish to muddle it with her involvement. She knew that *Bade Chachu* was keeping an eye out for her. She did not want to confuse the entire episode as it was unfolding now. She wished to guide Rajiv from outside. Any help she could do, she would offer but from the outside only. She did not want to be involved at least till the truth came out. She started digging deeper into her emails. She also looked at her Facebook and her Instagram profiles. She looked at any possible hints on Khushbu's profile on social media. Khushbu's social media profiles were not updated and

did not give out any hints. They were clean and without anything substantial to offer. She was sure Rajiv would have already done his homework on Khushbu's profiles.

Rajiv was snoring now. Deep in sleep. He looked calm and composed in his sleep. It was a hard day's work for him out there that day. He might have been quite happy with what he had achieved that day.

And indeed, Rajiv had found an opening into the case, but he would have to keep at it for some more time. Hopefully, he would soon get to the bottom of the case and reconstruct the events.

Amrita felt restless now. She needed answers more than anyone else. She could not come out in the open, though. She had to keep helping Rajiv over the next couple of days. Let truths be told!

NOSY NEIGHBOUR AUNT

Patna; 9 January 2015

Rajiv reached out to Mrs. Jha early that winter morning. She lived alone. He was there at sharp 9 a.m. when she was having her morning cuppa. He joined her for a hot cup of tea prepared with a solid dose of masalas in Indian style. It was good for the body. It could fight the cold and keep one fighting fit. Old ladies were used to multiple types of ancient Indian home remedies, au naturel! The Atharva Veda provides many Ayurvedic solutions to common health-related ailments. It has answers for the cure of multiple ailments. It is the last of the Four Vedas and a treatise on everyday life. Indian grannies claim that tea prepared with certain masalas and herbs is one of the best ways to build immunity against influenza and fever in the winter season.

Rajiv was eager to understand as to why Mrs. Jha was restive when she first saw the police at Ajit's doorstep on the day of Khushbu's death. She wanted to say something, but it hadn't been clear earlier that day. To be precise, no one spoke to her that day. So, here was Rajiv, to complete a key piece of his homework on the subject.

"May I call you Auntie ji, Mrs. Jha? Mrs. Jha is way too formal," Rajiv enquired.

Mrs. Jha was quite happy to be called Auntie ji as she was anyway Auntie ji for the entire colony. She had never married and that was by her own free will. It might have been difficult to sustain such a decision in those days as all that parents wanted to do with a girl child was to get them married off in decent families. The notion was that the parental responsibility of the girl child was over once she was handed over to a groom, after a much-publicized wedding.

Mrs. Jha said, "Rajiv ji, I am happy that you have finally found the time to come over for my statement. I do not know how much use it will be to you, but I can say for sure that I was not happy with that man

they so happily call *Bade Chachu*. I do not understand why he used to come to meet Khushbu. He would never go inside the house; she would come out and meet him. They would discuss certain things that I could not hear but I would see Khushbu agitated after those discussions."

"Hold on, Auntie ji, can you be more specific? How many meetings? What were the dates? How many days before her death? Would the so-called *Bade Chachu* come out of his vehicle or did you think it was his vehicle? I need to know all the details with complete clarity. Moreover, it is for me to take a call as to what part of your statement is helpful and what is not. You please be as vivid in your description as possible. There's one request, though—please do not add anything to make it a good story. It should not be one of those grandma stories. It should be the truth as you saw it and nothing but the truth," Rajiv averred.

"Rajiv ji, I am happy to tell you all of the truth and nothing other than the truth as I understand. I will not color your mind with my inferences. I will leave it to you to decipher the whole picture. My messaging will be correct is all I can say."

"Auntie ji, I am happy that you completely understand the ideal way to present the facts of the case to me. I will make my assessment later. I need to record this conversation." Rajiv took out his phone.

"Rajiv ji, I am Sashi Jha, unmarried for life. I do not have anyone living with me here in my house or anyone else in my family. I was a clerk with the Railways and am now happily retired. I am seventy and I am known as Auntie ji in this colony. Khushbu married into the family of my neighbors. She married Ajit, who is a very good boy, very down-to-earth, and very likable. He will prosper in his career. This sad turn of events in his house in such a short time after his wedding has left the entire colony sad. None of us have been able to recover from the double whammy of Khushbu's death and the immediate rounding up of Ajit and his parents for culpable homicide. They are good God-fearing people and I am honest in my assessment here that they are not involved in this suicide or murder. Their world has been torn apart after the death of their darling daughter-in-law. It will take them a lot of time to recover from this mess. One loses all hope in trying times like this.

Ajit is devastated and badly hurt. He has lost his wife. He has also lost his job.

"I want to tell you about this man they call *Bade Chachu*. I know he is a big man in the government. He is a promoted IAS if you know. I used to know that he was a great person who always helped Ajit and his parents. He has always performed his duties of a *Bade Bhaiya* and a *Bade Chachu* in the times of need. He has earned a lot of love and respect from the family. I am however piqued at why those two meetings happened outside the house from inside the car. Why did he not go inside the house to speak to Khushbu if he had to? He was always welcome at their house. Did he know Khushbu from before? I have no clue."

Rajiv interjected, "Auntie ji, you told me you will not try to color the episode by trying to interpret. I just need to hear as to what exactly happened or at least what you saw both the times."

"Rajiv ji, I know. I know. I have been trying to interpret ever since her death. But I haven't been able to as I do not have the kind of perspective that you have of the case by now. I know that's the right way and let me narrate what I saw.

"If I am not mistaken, the first meeting happened around the 9th or the 10th December. I don't exactly remember. It was exactly a day after Khushbu came back from somewhere in the same car. I thought she had gone for some shopping in *Bade Chachu' s* car, but she was not carrying anything with her. She might not have done any shopping. Newlywed girls do not need any stuff immediately after their wedding, you know!

They carry so much from their parents' house. I did

not enquire or read too much into it then.

"However, when *Bade Chachu* came to meet her the next day, she was not looking very cheerful. She did not say pranam or insist that *Bade Chachu* come over to the house. They talked outside the house. *Bade Chachu* was in the car and she was outside. I could not hear their conversation much. My ears are not too reliable now and feeble distant voices are difficult to hear, but I can understand emotions very well.

My eyesight is decent, and my sense of judgement has not been lost to age. In fact, it seems to be improving with age.

I thought it was a chance meeting between them. Bade Chachu might have been travelling this way and might have seen her standing outside. He might have been busy. So, he just had a couple of minutes of chat with Khushbu and sped away.

I guess that was it. Nothing more to it. Two relatives meeting each other. I did not see Khushbu that day again. I did not see her again for the next few days. Thought she was busy with her in-laws, possibly trying to be a good bahu. I had my own work to do. I am quite busy normally. I come out mostly in the afternoons to have my share of setting sun. It, hopefully, gives me my dose of Vitamin D. My calcium statistics are quite decent. At my age, I do not have osteoporosis. I will possibly age gracefully," Auntie ji surmised.

Rajiv had to add, "Auntie ji, you told me you are seventy, but till then I believed you are just about fifty. You do not look your age. I am happily surprised to see your energy levels and your memory. You are a sweetheart!"

Auntie ji blushed. She said, "Rajiv ji, you are not like a police guy. You are different. You know how to speak with old people! I thank you for your compliment even though it is over the top! Let's get back to business!

After a few days, I guess around three days before her death, Khushbu met *Bade Chachu* again in a similar fashion. This time there were two cars waiting for her outside her house. I could see *Bade Chachu* talking to Khushbu for about five minutes from inside the car. Khushbu looked disturbed. She was moving her hands violently while talking but she kept her voice low. I could not hear *Bade Chachu's* voice. I could also see someone else sitting next to him. I have no clue who it was. The second car behind his car seemed to be of a senior officer as it had gunmen inside. It also had a big hooter and light on top, but it was silent. Both these cars were the lovely old Ambassadors. Clean and tidy.

After about five minutes into the conversation, I saw Ajit's father coming out from the house. He came towards the car and stood next to

Khushbu. She suddenly changed her manner of talking and *Bade Chachu* said something that sounded like he was getting late. They were on some important mission and could not get inside the house or have a longer conversation. He waved goodbye and the two cars left.

I could see Amitabh ji going inside with Khushbu in tow. After that, I did not see or hear anything from Khushbu. I got to see her only after the police came to the scene after her untimely death. Well, this is not a story. These are the facts of the case as much as I know. I have no inkling what transpired between *Bade Chachu* and Khushbu. They may just have been routine interactions of a *bahu* and an in-law. I wish to leave it at that without putting out my own theory. It is for you to take it forward. I would like a closure in this case, as it has destroyed Ajit's life. Amitabh ji and his wife also do not keep well. They are under a lot of stress. Please help them and the girl! May God help you!"

"Well, Auntie ji, I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have given me a lot of information that we were not aware of. It helps move the case forward. I will work on the information and try to reach some conclusion soon. Thank you very much for being a good law-abiding citizen," Rajiv concurred.

Rajiv had to go back to Amitabh ji soon. He wanted to know what happened after those meetings of Khushbu with *Bade Chachu*. He thought of meeting Amitabh ji and Reeta ji. He rang their house bell almost instantaneously. It was 10.30 a.m.

INCONCLUSIVE TALES

Patna; 9 January 2015

Rajiv was at the door. A maid opened the door and asked him to wait while she called Amitabh ji to see him.

"Good morning, Rajiv ji! What brings you here? Would you like to come in and have a cup of tea with us, please? Reeta, see Officer Rajiv ji is here. Please get some tea with ginger for both of us. Rajiv ji, would you care for some ginger tea?"

Rajiv entered saying that he would be happy to have some tea. He mentioned that he was with Mrs. Sashi Jha, their next-door neighbor, and he had masala tea at her place, earlier this morning. He sat on a wood carved sofa in front of a divan. The sofa was not varnished, and it had lost its sheen. The cloth was also old and crumpled over the years. The thickness of the seat was inappropriate. It must have been quite old and gone without maintenance all these years. The divan in front of it was not maintained either. It was quite the opposite of the freshly varnished teak sofa set at *Bade Chachu's* house. He could also see that the house seemed more compact. A lot of old furniture was somehow fitted into the drawing and the dining area. He could not see any new furniture or TV or refrigerator in the house. Generally, after a Bihari wedding, the bride brings a lot of new furniture and other fixtures, including her own bed to her in-laws' house.

Rajiv asked, "Amitabh ji, how are you all holding up? Guess life is miserable sometimes, but you always fight back. Hope you and your family are getting back into shape now."

Amitabh was quick to revert, "Rajiv ji, you are a kind person. I am sure you will get to the bottom of the case and clear our names. These events of the last couple of months have devastated us. We have seen two completely opposite sides of the coin. We are left shattered. Ajit is

also back here with us. If you like to see him, I will call him here as well. Totally at your discretion!"

"Please call Ajit and Reeta ji also. I wish to speak to all three of you together. I sincerely hope that none of you has anything to hide," Rajiv said.

Amitabh called his wife and son. They came over and sat down facing Rajiv on the divan. The family were confused and eager to know if Rajiv had some new information. They were hoping against hope that the case might have come to a logical conclusion and their names would be cleared.

Rajiv asked, "Amitabh ji, I got to know from Mrs. Jha that Khushbu met *Bade Chachu* twice outside the house. Do you have any clue why?"

"Well, I am not aware of two meetings here. I know that they met a couple of days before Khushbu's death. I saw *Bade Bhaiya* and someone else sitting in their car and speaking to her. As soon as I saw them chatting, I got out and went to meet *Bade Bhaiya*. All I found out was that he and his boss were passing by here and they happened to see Khushbu outside the house. They just wished to enquire about our wellbeing and soon left. There was nothing more to it. In fact, I did not find it an important piece of information and had totally forgotten it. Does it have any significance to the case, Rajiv ji?"

Rajiv was quick to reply. "Amitabh ji, I was very clear earlier as well that I need all information about the days preceding Khushbu's death. You should not overthink what information is useful to us and what is not. It is our work to separate the wheat from the chaff. I advise you to be complete in your narration. I need every bit of information."

A maid came with two cups of ginger tea. She kept them on the centre table and left. Reeta got up and served Rajiv and Amitabh. Rajiv thanked Reeta and turned his attention to Amitabh again.

Amitabh said, "I understand Rajiv ji. I will narrate all the facts that I know. A few days back, *Bade Bhaiya* told me that he was setting up an NGO, where Khushbu would work. They were setting it up so that Khushbu could utilize her time and skills to do some social work. He

also told me that his boss was helping him create the NGO and that some international financiers were ready to give a significant amount of funds for its development-related work. Khushbu would be the Chairperson of the NGO and she would have advanced female literacy and other social causes. The NGO has been formed now with Khushbu's consent. However, because of her untimely death, it is now shut down. *Bade Bhaiya* had taken Khushbu's approval for the venture and it seemed that she was very excited to work. She kept it from us only because she wanted to surprise us. We would have obviously been very happy if we had known.

"Also, I understand that Khushbu met *Bade Bhaiya* and his boss twice for the NGO proposal and she had given her consent. She also travelled to Gaya for the purpose. I was happy to know that she was an independent girl and had such noble thoughts for society. I do not know anything else about any other event. She might have met *Bade Bhaiya* outside the house for work relating to the NGO formation."

Rajiv asked Ajit and Reeta about any other event or anything else they remembered during their conversations with Khushbu. They replied in the negative. They also said they were completely clueless about the entire NGO matter.

Reeta, however, said that she felt Khushbu was withholding some information from them. She thought it was a new marriage and she might be wanting to have her own way of dealing with her emotions. She had a feeling that Khushbu was under stress the last few days before her death, but she did not discuss it even when she was asked gently about it. In fact, Reeta had mentioned it to her husband as well, but they thought they should give her a little more time. It was always difficult for a girl to come to a new house soon after the wedding and warm up immediately to her in-laws. It was quite natural to keep certain emotions to oneself.

Reeta also said that Khushbu was a well-mannered girl and they were blessed to have her in the family.

Rajiv later found out that Khushbu's parents were also completely in the dark as far as the NGO matter was concerned. They were dealing with their own health issues. Khushbu's mother was slowly getting into

depression. She was fighting it out by going for walks, parties, and other social events. However, she was also visiting the nearby Kanke Mental Hospital. Raj babu was handling it better but they were obviously devastated. They were in touch with Amrita alone and they used to speak often.

He now had only one choice. He had to meet *Bade Chachu' s* boss at the earliest. Only he was left, and he could throw more light on the NGO matter. He thought of speaking to Bade Chachu to organize a meeting with his boss.

Bade Chachu was a man of his word. He organized a quick meeting with his boss. Rajiv was to meet him at his bungalow in Patna the day after.

MANY SUMMERS AGO

Patna; 10 January 2015

Amrita was on a conference call with her staff when she heard that Cockpit was being made the Marketing Head of the organization. She felt a deep chasm open within her instantly. She took a leave from the call and pulled herself together. She knew her continued absence from work and Cockpit's amazing recent achievements had done her in.

She, however, knew that her priorities were right and that she had to fight for her best friend. She had to get to the bottom of the case. Rajiv had updated her about his meetings with Mrs. Jha and with Ajit and his parents. She was also aware of the phone call with Khushbu's parents. She now hoped that Rajiv's meeting with Ghanshyam would possibly share some light on the facts and help close the case. He was the only person yet to be questioned.

She was aware that the questioning would be difficult as Ghanshyam was a senior IAS officer and he could completely deflect Rajiv's interrogation. He could lead him to a path from which Rajiv could never recover or he could even get him transferred from the case.

She was probing into her data as well. Anything from Khushbu in the past, any hints, any partial texts if at all, that she could find out. Upon extensive search she found a short one-sentence email from Khushbu that she might have ignored earlier, which was sent to her personal email id. Her personal email id was full of junk which she never cleared. It had a thousand unread messages.

The email read:

I KNOW WHO RAPED YOU AS A KID IN SCHOOL MANY SUMMERS AGO…

That was all to the mail. It was composed on the 21st of December 2014 at 11:45 p.m.

Khushbu was bolt-stricken! She got goosebumps. She was dumbstruck. She could not move even an inch. She was unable to express her emotions to herself. She did not cry. She fell silent and pensive. But she could now totally relate to Khushbu. Khushbu's death was a by-product of her knowledge of Amrita's past tormentor. The ghosts had risen from her own dead and buried past. The ghosts had taken her best friend away from her. To bury her and to chant dark magic mantras.

She knew in either case—suicide or murder—this information had a big role to play. Even if she had decided to commit suicide, she must have been abetted to it by her own tormentor. Who could it be? *Bade Chachu* nee Ravi ji or his boss Ghanshyam? How could she be so sure? She thought furiously and tried to connect the dots and analyze the situation as it might have unfolded in Khushbu's life.

Khushbu might have suddenly realized that she was now aware of a past crime against her best friend. After all, Amrita was just a little kid then. It was a heinous crime, committed in a school. That made it worse! Worse still, in front of the protector of the school, committed by a self-proclaimed institution builder. Ghanshyam's shot to fame was the work he did for the so-called upliftment of government-aided schools. But he was one who had scarred her friend's soul forever. One who might have done it to many other girls her age from that position of power. A pervert. A loathsome individual. Having met that person and having uncovered the ghastly past of that inhuman being, Khushbu must have felt deep angst and total devastation. She may not have been able to recover from the incident and she must have been pushed to the edge. For obvious family reasons and possibly a need to protect the honor of *Bade Chachu*, she may have kept quiet. Not only from the family, but from Amrita too. From her best friend too.

In private, she may have given some time to her best friend to react and to save her. She did give her a night's time. Time that Amrita did not utilize. Time that Amrita would regret for the rest of her life and never get back. Time that had moved on and waited for none.

Getting back on her feet, Amrita realized she needed to see Rajiv right away. She made a frantic call to Rajiv. Rajiv came to see her within half an hour. It was five in the evening. He was on his rounds in his area when he got the urgent call. He knew from Amrita's voice on the call that he simply had to be there, that very moment.

As soon as he entered the house, Amrita clung to him and started sobbing. She was saying something. Incoherently. He could feel her emotions. He could feel her pent-up anger. He could feel a different, diffident woman in his arms, not the oft-seen tigress. Amrita was a strong personality type. She was a confident and independent woman. She was fearless and calculating. He knew it had to be something with Khushbu. He caressed her. He gave her the feeling of warmth and protection. He was there for her. Always. He would see her through this episode. For sure!

Amrita sat by the bedside, unable to truly fathom the anger and distress that Khushbu must have gone through getting to know of Amrita's tormentor. She knew she would have given in to her intense emotions and her strong feeling of necessity to protect her family. She would protect her family from all odds and all troubles. She also must have felt the need to protect Amrita. Her rights against a criminal. What could she have done?

Rajiv got her a glass of warm water. He sat beside her. She narrated the story as it unfolded in front of her. She showed him the email from Khushbu. It was all getting clear. Amrita was from Kanha and Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. Bade Chachu had never worked in Madhya Pradesh. He was always based out of Bihar, in various districts. However, his present superior in services, Ghanshyam, was from the Madhya Pradesh cadre. He was once a renowned secretary of the Department of Primary and Secondary Education, Government of Madhya Pradesh. He was credited for a lot of good work in uplifting the standards of government-aided schools. Could it have been a by- product of his work for schools? Was he using his power and grants to benefit in this least appropriate manner?

They agreed amongst themselves. It had to be Ghanshyam. Amrita vividly remembered the Chief Guest of the school event doing the unthinkable with a small kid in the school premises. In front of the

guardian of children, the school in-charge. She, however, remembered some other name of her tormentor. It was not Ghanshyam! She could not recollect though.

Rajiv felt bad for Khushbu. If only she had narrated her plight to Amrita! Amrita would have found a way to save Khushbu and still taken her fight to Ghanshyam. She would not have given in. “Was Khushbu a weak woman?” Rajiv muttered to himself.

“No, not at all. She was a warrior. She was a strong person. Not in the same way as myself. In her own way. She wanted to do a lot with her life. She wanted a happy life. She would not have just committed suicide. The pressure must have been externally induced. By *Bade Chachu*. By Ghanshyam. They are murderers! They are criminals,” Amrita wept as she spoke.

“I think you are correct in your assessment, Amrita. My thought process, however, doesn’t guide the judiciary. Based on my thoughts, I need to figure out a way to collect evidence. Data that would prove beyond reasonable doubt their involvement in her suicide. Or murder, if I may say,” Rajiv said. “I have a chance to meet Ghanshyam tomorrow morning. Why don’t you come with me to his place? I will try not to introduce you. If at all, I will say that you were covering Khushbu’s case from a psychological viewpoint. You are studying case of recent suicides and that you are working on a thesis.” Rajiv spoke as he thought and processed the information. A lot was going on in his mind already. He somehow had the feeling that the case was cracked, and he had the culprits in the strong arms of law.

Amrita agreed to the plan. She wanted to see her past tormentor. He had given her sleepless nights in her childhood. He was not a good soul.

YES, I DID IT!

11 January Patna

11:30 a.m.

Sprawling bungalow of the IAS officer Ghanshyam Tewari. Amrita mentioned to Rajiv that it could be Tewari ji that she knew of his tormentor. The name Ghanshyam did not ring any bells. Tewari ji most likely, she had retained. This guy was Ghanshyam Tewari. So, they may well be at the doorstep of her past tormentor and of Khushbu's present tormentor.

Security guards at the bungalow and multiple *ardalis*. Cooks and drivers. All provided by the state government as Tewari was a government servant. Working for the wellbeing of the common man. The IAS lobby is supposedly very strong. They want the best and get the best from the various States and even the Central government. For themselves.

They are like the guys without whom the government machinery would come to a halt. Ministers come and go. They are elected representatives of society. They can be booted out by the will of the people. IAS officers cannot be booted out by anyone. They have become all-powerful. They do show respect for ministers in their dealings. However, even ministers cannot get the files moved ahead if the *Babu* does not wish that to happen. The IAS lobby is like an octopus spreading its tentacles throughout the length and breadth of the country. They run the government and make all the laws. Whatever may be the will of the government, its writ runs through the pen of the IAS officer. This is how people generally describe IAS officers.

Rajiv and Amrita were sitting in the lobby adjacent to the meeting room. They were in a queue. Sixth in queue.

Ghanshyam was lambasting someone inside. He had apparently lost his cool. Must be a junior in his secretariat. He was asking for some file

that had gone missing. For the government, the filing system was of the utmost importance, howsoever archaic that might be. They were always able to unearth important files at the required instant. There seemed to be a major goof- up. The poor chap was out of his breath.

There rang a shrill voice of the bell. The *ardali* at the lobby sprang into action. He ran inside with all the chits along with the appointments file.

He came out running and was almost out of breath. Rajiv and Amrita were summoned inside. Queues work for common people. Rajiv was a decorated police officer. He had a roving reputation. Ravi would also have filled in his boss on the details by now and about his keen sense of judgement and understanding of the subject at hand. He was someone who could not be deflected from a case. He was a true investigator. You could transfer him out of a role, but you could not ask him not to probe any case. Rajiv would always do as he deemed fit. "You do as you deem fit. You may be a senior, but you need to know well of Rajiv's reputation. There have been previous instances where an entire mofussil has risen in Rajiv's favor to retain him in his role. Politicians were also aware of his star power and his charisma," Ravi might have told his boss.

"Please come in, Rajiv ji. I am glad to see you. One doesn't see such committed officers nowadays. Your reputation precedes you!" concurred Ghanshyam.

"I have heard a lot about you too, Ghanshyam ji. Happy to meet you in person. You have done a lot in your earlier role in your previous state. You are one of the better- known IAS officers in the country today. I am thankful to you for your raving review about me. I may not deserve it fully, though!" Rajiv said as he shook his hands with Ghanshyam.

"Well, so let's put the past behind. Let me know why you wanted to meet me. I am also puzzled at the sudden demise of that sweet girl, Khushbu. I am sorry. You have not introduced me to this beautiful girl," Tewari said as he looked askance at Amrita.

Rajiv was quick to respond, "Sir, she is Amrita. She is studying suicide cases and their victims. She is working on a hypothesis that suicide victims may not always be weak people. They may have been pushed

into it slowly by societal mores or in some cases, actually by criminals."

"Oh my God! That's quite a bit of hard work you are doing lady. Do you work for a journal? Rajiv ji, you should not have brought her with you. Anyway, let me be very clear: I do not know much about the suicide of Khushbu. I happened to meet her twice, in the presence of her uncle-in-law and we had great meetings regarding a possible NGO. Look, the NGO has already been formed. We are now applying for a cancellation due to the sudden death of Khushbu. I can tell you, though, that I would never have thought that she could commit suicide. She was in a good space. Recently married and doing well. She was also looking forward to doing a lot of social work. She wanted to be a part of something big. She was ambitious in the right way. She wanted to achieve big for the poor, you see!" Ghanshyam was now out of his breath. He had a sip of water.

Rajiv was prepared for Ghanshyam's reaction on Amrita. He said, "Sir, you are absolutely right. She was doing well. Am not able to understand why all this happened with her so shortly after her wedding. Even her in-laws and her husband are devastated. Her friends and family members are exerting a lot of pressure. We need to close the case quickly. Hence this visit.'

"I understand, Rajiv ji. What are your findings?"

"I am convinced that you and Ravi ji together pushed her towards taking her own life. She came to know that you had raped a Jabalpur child in her school. You were the chief guest at a function where the kid performed. You could not resist the temptation."

Ghanshyam began to perspire. Rajiv saw that the AC was chilling. Tewari suddenly went ballistic and shouted at Rajiv, "Who gave you the authority to come to meet me and tell me that I am a culprit in a crime that I have not committed? If I understand it right, you are accusing me of two crimes here. One of a rape of a child and the other of goading a person to suicide. What do you think of yourself, Rajiv? I could get you transferred out of the city. I could get you sent to the worst posting of your life. You do not know who you are speaking to."

That outburst convinced Rajiv. He knew Ghanshyam was the person they were looking for.

Ghanshyam shouted, “Let me call my security. They will throw you out, Rajiv! I would see you at the secretariat later. Let me take you to task today!”

Rajiv was not shaken even for a moment. He thought of asking his questions anyway. “Tewari ji, it will be better for you to answer my questions. This is definitely not an interrogation, but you cannot clear your name off your possible misdeeds if you do not help us help you,” Rajiv said in a conciliatory voice.

“Why are you mentioning my name as Tewari ji? Everyone calls me as Ghanshyam *babu* or Ghanshyam ji. Anyway, you talk like this, I am good. I did not like what you said earlier. It seems, without giving me a chance, you’ve proved me guilty. The Indian courts will not go by what you say, Rajiv. What proof do you have of my so-called crimes?”

“Sir, I have the relevant proof. I also have witnesses. You raped a child in her school. I have spoken to the in-charge of the school and he has confessed to your crime. A lady teacher was also a witness. I have been able to reach out to the little girl as well. She lives in Mumbai and she is willing to be a witness immediately. I can file the case today! Also, I have witnesses who would testify in the courts that you went and met Khushbu at her residence along with her *Bade Chachu*, that is Ravi ji. You went there to threaten her against telling anyone about your heinous past. She got to know about your crime, and she could have gone public. You would have lost your respect and you would have been tried for your crime. You would have been fired from your job.”

“What are you thinking, Rajiv? That you would come to me and talk all this gibberish? And I would just listen to all of it and do nothing about it? I have already called Ravi to my chambers here. He must be coming any moment. After that, I will present you to your DGP. You have lost your mind. You should not be carrying your service badge. You can hurt common people. You are insane. If you can do this to a senior IAS officer, what can you do to a common man?”

Suddenly Amrita jumped from her seat and ran up to Ghanshyam. Before he could react or Rajiv could stop her, she landed a heavy blow on his face. One blow under the chin as well. Rajiv was stunned. Ghanshyam had a bleeding nose. He had a cut under the chin. Blood oozed out. He was confused and in pain. Rajiv rushed to Amrita and held her back.

Tewari got up and looked at Amrita. Amrita said, “I was the child in school. You ruined my life. I still see images in my sleep and get up with a start. You scarred me for life. I will take you to the courts. I can completely recognize you.”

Tewari did not know what to do. He was looking perplexed at Rajiv. Amrita got close to Ghanshyam and squeezed his testicles. In a fit of rage. She took her revenge. Tewari could not stand it. He fell to the ground. Rajiv got him up and pushed him to his chair. “Your past catches up with you one day, Ghanshyam! Or Tewari? Which one should I call you? Is it because of your crime in Jabalpur, that you changed the way people call you here in Bihar? Was it to hide your identity that you got yourself a plum transfer to Bihar? Generally, people call everyone here by their titles. I was surprised the first time itself as to why you are famous by your first name and not your title here in Patna. I hope you realize what you’ve done. Not to her alone. Also, to Khushbu. She was such a pure soul. You took her life away from her!”

Amrita stood there. Unshaken. Undeterred. She had taken her revenge. She had to take the revenge for her best friend’s death. She was pushed into it for sure. Rajiv guided Amrita out.

THE ENDGAME

17 January Patna

Rajiv reached out to Khushbu's family. They were all asked to meet at Ajit's house. Khushbu's parents also flew down for the meeting.

Amrita was present at the meeting. Ajit was waiting with bated breath. They were all eager. Rajiv walked in at 11 a.m. He was not available in Patna for a couple of days. Amrita sat next to Khushbu's mother. She was holding her. Rajiv took a sip of tea and stated the events as they had unfolded.

"Your daughter was a gem of a person, Raja ji and Alka ji. She was a good human being. She was a great friend to Amrita, and she would have been a very good bahu to this family. Ajit, I must say, you have lost a partner for life. I feel sad for you." There was pin-drop silence. No one spoke. Amrita was a little agitated.

"Khushbu's death was mysterious as although it looked like a suicide, we could not find any reasons for it. A newlywed girl, happy in her new home with her new relationships suddenly decides to commit suicide. How could one fathom her thought process behind it? One must understand her mind. Her being. Her challenges. Her soul. Her worst dreams. Her kindness. Her gratitude. Her obsessions. Her relationships and her silent hoots and shrieks of cacophony. Her shrill and piercing shouts for someone to hear and comfort. All of it fell silent with her. In an instant. The time she decided to die. Or was she pushed to die? An unnatural death. One must go beneath her surface and understand the juxtaposition of her thoughts. A beautiful flower was plucked from this earth and thrown out by rotten people. She was trampled upon. It might have been her destiny. People who wronged her deserve capital punishment!" Saying this, Rajiv drank the remaining tea in a single gulp. It had gone cold.

Everyone was confused at the poetry of words from a police officer. Ajit raised his finger to ask a question.

Rajiv said, “Yes, Ajit, I know. She did not die on her own accord. She was forced into this suicide. Whatever situation developed post her wedding within a short timespan got her killed. None of you were responsible for it. I wish to seek apologies for holding you responsible earlier and sending you behind bars. I know now that none of you were involved. It was a family member, though. Your own *Bade Chachu* was involved in Khushbu’s death.” Rajiv looked at Ajit’s dad, Amitabh.

Amitabh was confused and wanted to say something when Rajiv stopped him, saying, “Amitabh ji, I know it is difficult to imagine. However, the choices that a man makes defines the actions that he takes and eventually the person that he becomes. Your *Bade Bhaiya* is a socially amiable person with integrity and a background of doing a lot of good to the society at large. He has done a lot of good to your family too. If I charge him with some misdeeds, I do so with full knowledge of the background in which it happened and with full authority. I have filed my case yesterday in the criminal court accusing him and Ghanshyam Tewari, your *Bade Bhaiya’s* boss, of criminally goading Khushbu to commit suicide. It is on the air now on all television channels. I guess you haven’t watched TV this morning.” Rajiv asked Ajit to switch on the television.

Surprised, Ajit did so. The news of Khushbu’s suicide was playing on a loop on all local channels. She was driven to it by two IAS officers. Details of the crime were being unraveled with graphic details. At her second meeting in Gaya, Khushbu might have figured out that Tewari was the same IAS officer who was involved in scarring the soul of a child. Of a child who grew up to be her best friend. Of Amrita! She was furious and she hit Tewari hard. She gave him a tight slap. At this Tewari slapped her back, harder. She fell with her hands chipping off a side of the centre table. That explained the varnish on the centre table and the sofa chairs at *Bade Chachu’s* house. The chipped side could not be repaired, though, and it caught the searching eye of the police officer.

Khushbu would have mulled over the thought of speaking to Ajit or Amrita about it multiple times. She wanted to talk about her issues with her *Bade Chachu* and his boss, but she might not have had the courage to say it soon enough. Moreover, *Bade Chachu* came twice to meet her separately, without entering the house. Once also with Tewari. It was a tale gone wrong. She was gung-ho on a career ahead and she wanted to surprise her family. She got deep distress and anguish in return. She chose not to speak to anyone and to let it wither. She chose to die, to somehow protect her beloved family and her beloved friend. You may question her choices or call her out as a weak person, but she did what she thought was right. She chose that path as she was pushed towards it by a family member. She tried to protect the dignity of the family and of her friendship with Amrita. The path she chose, in hindsight, might look convoluted and all wrong, but she was pushed towards it and she obviously could not fight it.

The rest, as they say, is history!

THE EPILOGUE

3 March 2015

Amrita is back in Mumbai and has changed into a better person. She works with Cockpit and has earned his trust. He gives her large client mandates and she runs it with renewed vigor and enthusiasm. She wishes to have in her the good of Khushbu and the good of Amrita. Rajiv's love for her has had a salutary impact on her. She has been exuding fresh charm of late. Rajiv comes to visit her sometimes. She visits him on weekends. Often. Her HR is happy at the turn of events. They know that Cockpit and Amrita are better together than alone. They would dive deep into business and decimate the competition. For good!

Ajit's name has been cleared of all the misdeeds by the media. The courts would follow. He has got his job back, with a raise. He must make good of the lapsed time. He must be a super-achiever to keep Khushbu's faith in him alive. The departed soul gives him strength day after day. To reach for the sky. In his job. He takes good care of his parents. He has been transferred to Patna. He is living a silent do-gooder life. He secretly wishes to create an NGO one day.

Khushbu's parents are slowly getting back in their element. One instant, they are cheerful and happy; another, they are sad and melancholic. They know deep within that Khushbu was a good soul. It is their way of giving it back to her. She must feel happy whenever she sees them from her heavenly abode. They are trying their best to lead a life without their only offspring. Not easy as they say. Alka has had trouble with a newly found sense of deep depression. She wishes to fight it out and she hopes her daughter is happy to see her from above and beyond. However, Khushbu's loss is going to be impossible to fill.

It has created a void in Alka's life. That void cannot be filled. Amrita tries to fill it in her own little ways and Alka loves her almost like her offspring.

Well, almost! The Kanke girl was forced towards suicide. It was an abetment of suicide. How could Alka forget all of it and become overtly social again? How could she forget that he little Kanke girl was the cynosure of her eyes?

Ravi and Tewari have been arrested and they have been remanded to police custody for fourteen days. They have been charged under multiple sections of the Penal Code. Tewari has become the face of ridicule by the public at large.

The state government has announced a police medal for Rajiv. It is for his professional work ethics and for his never-to-be-bogged-down attitude. He knew that this was possible only since heinous crimes had reduced substantially, in the State of Bihar. He could provide time and effort to solving Khushbu's case. Earlier, as there was a flurry of cases of murders and mayhems, such cases would get lost in the din. The police force could never put an officer to work on such cases. He is secretly happy that he has a girlfriend of his choice. He wishes to propose to her soon.

The quartet of professors had one more story to debate and discuss threadbare. This was more personal of sorts as they knew the families involved rather well. They went about it with clockwork precision.

Bihar is undergoing throes of change with personal and social choices changing. With disposable incomes rising in the state and with better road and air connectivity, the story of consumption is alive and kicking. Youngsters are getting fashion and brand- conscious and that is helping the retailers and malls. People are eating out more than ever and watching movies at multiplexes. It is a death knell for single- screen theatres, but some are reinventing themselves.

Kanke, which used to be a small sleepy colony in Ranchi, is also changing with Malls and large condominiums coming up. The place has changed. Ranchi as you knew it a few years back, has changed. Kanke has a lot of its own stories to be told. For one, it has mental institutions of national repute there. Each person there, has had a tragic past. Whilst it could give its own share of tragic real-life stories, one has to be consious that one is dealing

with people and their past. One has to deal with it before writing about it. I do not however, commit to writing any real stories here. I would continue to write about fictional characters and fictional stories.

This story seemingly ends here but it could give birth to another and soon!

So, keep looking!

LET'S CONNECT

17 April 2021

Dear Friend,

I sincerely hope you enjoyed the book. I would love to know your feedback. A small gesture of rating and reviewing it on Amazon, Goodreads, or your social media handles would provide a lot of comfort and happiness to your friend here.

This story would develop, and new characters would get introduced, but I would like to know your opinion about some of the important characters in this novel. We had
the feisty one and the sober one, and a word on that would help me understand your taste.

I would love it if you connect with me here:

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